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No. 580.



"HE IS DEAD! HE IS DEAD!" SHE CRIED. "WHO IS HE?" ASKED ONE. "RODNEY ST. ORME!" AND SHE TORE THE MASK FROM HIS FACE.

THE STRAINS OF MUSIC, SHOUTS OF LAUGHTER AND
BURN OF VOICES FLOATED OUT THROUGH THE WINDOWS
OF A LORDLY MANSION, SITUATED UPON THE SHORES OF
LONG ISLAND SOUND, AND FELL PLEASANTLY UPON THE
EARS OF THOSE ON THE DECKS OF PASSING VESSELS.

telling of joyous revelry and happy hearts ashore.

Sleepy Hollow Manor, as the grand old house of the Dabneys was called, was ablaze with light, for from far and wide there had come to partake of its hospitality, a goodly throng of guests, invited in honor of the return home of one of the heirs to the vast fortune of old Judge Dabney, who some two years before had died leaving to a younger generation to enjoy the riches he had accumulated in a long life of industry.

There were three heirs to the fortune, and they were cousins to each other, two youths and a young girl.

One of these, Richard Dabney was the son, and only child of the judge, and he had entered West Point when fifteen years of age, determined upon a military career.

Rodney St. Orme was a nephew of the judge, and an only child of a widowed sister, whom the master of Sleepy Hollow Manor had devotedly loved.

He was three years the senior of his Cousin Richard, and had been made one-third heir in the fortune of his uncle, with whom also he had resided, being under the guardianship of a private tutor.

Pearl Vavasour was the third heir, and, at the time of her uncle's death was in her eighteenth year.

Her mother had also been a sister of the judge, and had run off from school to marry a French music-teacher who had died and left her with a little daughter to care for.

Years after the judge had found her out and cared for her, and when his will was read it was found that he had made the son and daughter of his two sisters equal heirs with his own son, Richard.

Mrs. Vavasour had been serving as mistress of the manor, and she had been cared for in her brother's will, and was requested to make her home there until the three heirs became of age, when the property would be divided.

So matters stood when vacation days came, and then Pearl came home from boarding-school, Rodney St. Orme returned from college and Richard Dabney received a short leave from the Military Academy that he might visit Sleepy Hollow Manor.

In honor of the occasion Madam Vavasour, as she liked to be called, had thrown the mansion open, the first time since the death of the judge, and an entertainment had been given, to which young and old, for miles around, had been invited.

The mansion looked to be almost on fire, with its many lights, and the magnificent grounds looked like fairy land with the hundreds of colored lanterns that hung in the shrubbery.

The moon was at its full, and poured down a flood of radiance from a cloudless sky, while birds, awakened by the glare and music sung merrily in the trees.

The scent of flowers floated upon the soft air, and the whole scene was one to remain in one's memory never to be effaced.

It was a masquerade ball, and between the dances many maskers were seen strolling about the grounds or along the white, sandy beach.

Among these were two forms who were conversing together in a low tone, one clad in the gorgeous dress of a Spanish bull-fighter, and the other as a *vivandiere*.

Both wore masks, and yet each seemed to know just who the other was.

As they approached the boat-house—a handsome pavilion, in the style of a pagoda—a form was seen to step out of the shadow and advance toward them.

The form was clad in the full costume of a Mexican senor, gold-embroidered sombrero and all. It was a dress that had attracted universal admiration during the evening, and many guesses had been made as to who was the wearer.

When within ten feet of the approaching couple, the arm of the Mexican was raised quickly, a red flash dimmed the moonlight for an instant, a sharp report rung out, silencing the hum of voices, and then followed a wild shriek in a woman's voice.

A silence for full a moment that followed, most appalling, and then came in a voice of terror:

"I! Come to me, for Rodney St. Orme is murdered!"

From the lips of the *vivandiere* of maskers ran toward her knees, bending companion, the Spanish

"dead!" she cried.

"Who is he?" asked one.

"Rodney St. Orme!" and she tore the mask from his face, revealing the handsome features of the youth.

"Who did this deed?" demanded a young man, tearing his mask from his own face as he approached.

"It was he who wore the Mexican costume, and he came from the boat-house and fired a pistol at Rodney," explained the maiden, who had been upon the arm of young St. Orme when he was shot, and she was led away in an agony of grief.

"He is dead, for the bullet has entered his brain—a well-aimed shot, certainly. Come, friends, let us carry the body to the mansion, and a sad ending it will be for this night of gayety."

"But where is his murderer?" asked one.

"Was it a murder?" another queried.

"What else could it have been?"

"An accident."

"Bah! that shot was a deadly one, and so intended."

"Then let us find the murderer," cried a voice, and a score of young men dashed off in pursuit of the one who had worn the costume of a Mexican cavalier.

Up to the mansion the body of Rodney St. Orme was borne, while carriages were rolling away with their frightened occupants, and the scene of festivity had become one of sorrow and gloom.

CHAPTER II.

THE ACCUSED.

INTO the spacious library of Sleepy Hollow Manor the body of the dead young man was taken, and the guests who still remained, moved about with hushed voices and anxious faces.

Where was the one who had committed the murder, for such all now believed it to have been?

Lela Lawrence, the pretty *vivandiere*, was with her parents in the parlors, and she was striving hard to be calm, and tell what she knew about the tragic affair.

"I had been recognized by Rodney, through a ring that I wore, and he gave me six guesses to name who he was, and I guessed the third one.

"Then we walked down to the shore-road, and were approaching the boat-house, to take a row out on the waters, for there were other rowers out, when I saw the one who fired the shot step out of the shadow into the moonlight.

He crossed the boat-house and came toward us, then stopped, when but a few feet distant and raised his arm.

"A flash and report followed and Rodney sunk down by my side.

"In my fright I do not know what became of the murderer."

Such was the story of Lela Lawrence, and her white scared face showed what a shock it had been to her to witness what she had.

"You say that the one who fired was he who wore the elegant Mexican costume?" asked a gentleman who was a noted Metropolitan lawyer.

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure about his costume, Miss Lela?"

"Yes, sir, for I saw it distinctly and there was no other costume like it."

"It was the one who wore the Mexican costume who fired the shot, for I saw him also," said a bystander.

"And so did I, though I was some distance away," a young lady added.

"And who is he?"

"And where is he?"

Such were the questions that went flying about.

All had now unmasked, and just then two persons entered the spacious parlors, but by different doors.

They were both masked, and stopped as they crossed the threshold and gazed about them.

One was a maiden, the other a young man.

The former was attired as a Gypsy Queen, and a beautiful costume it was that she wore.

The latter was clad as a Mexican.

A hush fell upon all as they beheld the one in the Mexican garb.

There he stood, still unmasked, and he seemed surprised.

"Have all unmasked so soon?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the lawyer, and he added:

"It is our request that you unmask also."

"Certainly," and the mask was removed.

A startled cry came from many lips, a murmur of amazement, commingled with horror

went around the room, for all recognized in the one who stood before them *the West Point Cadet, Richard Dabney*.

The lawyer stepped quickly toward him and said sternly:

"Cadet Dabney, do you know of what you are accused?"

"Accused?" and he changed color, as all saw.

"Yes, for a fearful accusation rests upon you."

"It is false whatever the accusation is, sir," was the quick and hot reply.

"That you must prove, sir, for the charge against you is *murder!*"

"Murder!"

As he uttered the words Richard Dabney started back and turned deadly pale.

"Yes, you are accused of murdering your cousin, and adopted brother, Rodney St. Orme!"

"Lawyer Lennox, do you dare lay such a charge upon me, sir?"

"Cadet Dabney, I hope to Heaven you can prove that it is false; but not half an hour ago your cousin, Rodney St. Orme, was shot down by the boat-house, while Miss Lela Lawrence was upon his arm.

"The murderer stepped out of the boat-house and several people saw him, and he was dressed in Mexican costume."

"My God!"

"You alone wear such costume; it is known that there was ill feeling between Rodney and yourself; you are a dead shot, and the bullet went straight to the forehaed. Can you prove that you are innocent?"

"Alas! how can I, for I will not be believed. I see that from the faces of you all. I am accused and already found guilty," and the young cadet gazed with an appealing look about him.

"I can prove Dick's innocence of murder, for he was with me out upon the waters," and the one in the costume of a Gypsy Queen stepped forward and threw off her mask.

It was Pearl Vavasour.

"He was with you?" asked Lawyer Lennox hopefully.

"Yes, we went, as I said, for a row upon the Sound, and have but now returned.

"You must look elsewhere for the murderer of poor Rodney," and tottering forward Pearl would have fallen fainting to the floor, had not Richard Dabney caught her in his arms.

He bore her to her room and left her in the care of her mother, while he descended to the library where lay the body of the man whom he was accused of having killed.

All stood aside as he entered to allow him to pass.

There were those who still believed he was guilty, but they wisely held their peace as he stood in the presence of the dead.

Going up to the body, where it lay upon the lounge, the cadet still in his masquerade costume of a Mexican, placed his hand upon the forehead, right over the small wound the bullet had made, and said softly:

"Poor Rod, how sad your fate, to be thus cut off in the very bloom of your life."

"Ah Rod! if you had only lived to know—"

But, here he paused, for he seemed to realize that he spoke aloud and others heard his words.

A moment more he stood there and then turning from the body left the library and sought his own room.

Hardly had he done so when a stout man took his stand outside of his door, and a companion of his stood on the piazza opposite the windows that might serve as a means of exit for the accused, should he make an effort to escape.

CHAPTER III.

THE VERDICT.

THE morning dawned upon Sleepy Hollow Manor cloudy and dismal. The elements seemed to be in sympathy with those who dwelt there. Servants were busy removing the lanterns from the trees and taking away all remnants of the grand entertainment of the night before.

A village undertaker's wagon stood at the door, and in the library were gathered a coroner's jury, who were to decide as to how Rodney St. Orme came to his death to the best of their knowledge.

Within doors a pall rested upon the household, for Miss Vavasour was locked in her room, her mother was pacing the halls uneasily, the servants moved about with silent awe and the door of Dick Dabney's chamber was closed, while without sat a constable.

This proved that there was still suspicion resting upon him in spite of the words of Pearl Vavasour.

At last Madam Vavasour knocked at the door of Richard Dabney's room.

It was opened by its occupant, who was dressed in his cadet uniform.

His face was very pale, and the bed showed that he had not retired during the long hours of the night.

The constable had said that he had heard the young man moving about all night, doubtless pacing the floor.

"Dick, will you not join us at breakfast?" said Madam Vavasour quietly.

"No, auntie, thank you, I prefer to keep my room until this fearful charge against me is settled; but you may send me a cup of strong coffee, please."

"I will, and some breakfast too, for you may be able to eat something."

"This is fearful, is it not, auntie?"

"It is, Richard."

"Where is Pearl?"

"In her room."

"Poor girl," and Dick Dabney turned away; but his ears caught the low-uttered words of his aunt:

"Poor boy!"

He knew that it was to him that she referred.

Then Madam Vavasour left the door, and the constable took his stand once more.

It was ten o'clock when Richard Dabney was called down into the library.

The body of Rodney St. Orme lay in its coffin there, and the coroner's jury had discussed the pros and cons of the case.

Madam Vavasour was there, also Pearl, and the latter was as white as a ghost.

Near her stood a young man to whom it was said that she was engaged.

He was an artist, and his name was Oscar Leighton.

A handsome fellow, he was yet reserved to hauteur and, a stranger in the neighborhood, the young men had not liked his having won the beautiful Pearl Vavasour, if rumor to the effect that he had done so was correct.

Lawyer Lennox was also there, and he was watching the interest of Richard Dabney, for he knew that the life of the young cadet was in danger.

At one side sat Lela Lawrence with her father and the two others who had seen the murderer fire the fatal shot were also present.

The jurors looked solemn and wise, as though they knew it all, and the eyes of all turned upon the cadet when he entered.

He bowed to all present and took his seat almost near enough to the coffin to lay his hand upon the corpse.

Lela Lawrence was the first witness examined and she told her story the same as the night before; but she knew now that her words were putting in jeopardy the cadet, whom she had accused.

She was compelled to state that she had recognized the costume of the murderer as one that all had admired, and yet none could guess the wearer.

The gorgeous sash, the velvet jacket with its silver and gold embroidery, the large sombrero, with its jingling bells of gold, the massive spurs and white silk mask she had plainly seen.

"And the size of the wearer?" she was asked by the coroner.

"Was about the same as Cadet Dabney's form; but I do not believe him guilty, nor did I when I saw who was the wearer of the Mexican costume," she said.

The weapons belonging to the cadet were then brought from his room and examined.

Not one was loaded, yet a pistol seemed to have been recently fired.

The two others who had seen the shot fired told their story, and they, too, said that when they beheld who it was that had worn the Mexican costume they knew that it could not have been Dick Dabney.

"Was there another costume worn like it last night?" asked a juror.

"None."

Then Pearl told her story, and it was uttered in a low but firm voice.

"I was on the beach alone, for I went there to look for some one, and my cousin joined me.

"I knew him by his voice, and asked him to take me for a row upon the waters, and he did so.

"We were quite a distance off when we heard the pistol-shot, and upon our return we landed at the lower boat-house and came up to the mansion by the north entrance, parting at the steps and both entering the parlors together but by different doors.

"Then it was that I saw something had happened."

"How long were you with Cadet Dabney?" asked the coroner.

"Nearly an hour, I should say."

Then the coroner turned to the cadet, and asked:

"Will you tell your story now, sir?"

"I was out upon the water when the shot was fired, sir, and knew nothing whatever of the murder until I entered the parlor as my cousin, Miss Vavasour, did."

"May I ask if you are engaged to your cousin, Miss Vavasour?"

"I am not, sir."

"There is a rumor to the effect that you are."

"It is a mistake, sir, for my regard for Miss Vavasour is such as a brother feels for a sister."

"This is true, Miss Vavasour?"

"It is, sir."

"Cadet Dabney, I would ask you if there was any ill-feeling existing between the deceased and yourself?"

"There was, sir."

"You were on bad terms together?"

"We had not been as friendly of late as in our younger days."

"Will you give the reason, sir?"

"I will not," was the firm response.

In vain did the coroner urge and almost threaten, the cadet remained firm.

"In case of your cousin's death, how does his fortune go?"

"In case he died before he was of age, and unmarried, it would go to me."

"He was not of age?"

"He would have been of age in two months more."

"Ah! and should Miss Vavasour die?"

"Her inheritance would go to me, if she died before she married."

"And did not this will of your father's fret you, that he made your cousins' co-heirs with yourself?"

"Why should it, for he left me a large fortune, and I have a profession that would bring me support, even if I had nothing else."

The case looked against the young cadet; but the witnesses who had testified could only say that the murderer wore a Mexican suit, and then there was Pearl Vavasour, whom no one dared doubt, swore to having been upon the water with the accused when the shot was fired.

With these facts staring them in the face there was nothing to do, in spite of circumstantial evidence to the contrary, but to give a verdict in favor of Richard Dabney, and that verdict was that "Rodney St. Orme came to his death at the hands of a party to the jury unknown."

CHAPTER IV. AT THE GRAVE.

THE acres surrounding Sleepy Hollow Manor were numerous, and stretched away inland for quite a distance, while to either side of the mansion for half a mile, the grounds belonged to the estate.

Upon a point of land not far from the mansion was the little burying-ground of the Dabneys.

There lay buried five generations, and the spot had been well cared for by the living, who expected some day to lay their bones alongside of their dead ancestors.

To this lonely spot, where the surf of the Sound would forever ring a requiem to the repose of his soul, the body of Rodney St. Orme was borne.

It was followed to the grave by a vast concourse of people, and first among the mourners were Richard Dabney and his cousin, Pearl, who clung to his arm.

Behind these two came Madam Vavasour and Oscar Leighton, and then followed others.

Upon the stern, white face of Richard Dabney every eye was turned as he stood gazing down into the open grave, and many heard the low-spoken words of Pearl Vavasour:

"Courage, Dick, it will soon be over."

He spoke no word, and his face was like marble as his eyes rested upon the coffin, while the deep voice of the clergyman read the impressive service for the dead.

Then a hymn was sung, and the melody rolled out across the waters until every heart was filled with tears.

Still that impassive face showed no emotion. Whatever there was in the heart of Richard Dabney he did not betray it.

At length the solemn ceremony was over, the crowd turned away, and upon reaching the carriage, Richard Dabney handed Pearl in while he said:

"I will walk home."

The vehicle drove off with Madam Vavasour, Pearl, and Oscar Leighton, and Richard Dabney remained alone at the little burying-ground, for the grave-digger had done his work and departed.

For a long time did the young cadet stand by the new-made grave of the man he had been accused of murdering, and then he started, for a band fell upon his arm and Pearl Vavasour stood by his side.

"Pearl, I thought you had returned home," he said, and his lips became bloodless.

"I left the carriage at the boat-house, and then returned here to see you, Dick."

"And why?"

"Dick Dabney, from my inmost soul I feel for you," she said, with a sudden burst of emotion.

"I feel that you do, Pearl, for it is an awful brand to have forced upon one."

"Awful indeed; but you have borne up bravely under it."

"But, oh, Dick! Dick! why was it so?"

"Circumstantial evidence, Cousin Pearl, was against me, and but for your testimony in my favor I would now be in prison."

"And did you think that I would refuse to perjure myself to save your life?"

"No, no, I heard the shot, I heard you accused, for I knew who it was that wore the Mexican costume, and I hid away waiting for you to come."

"When you did I also entered the parlors to save you."

"By false testimony."

"Was it not better so, for would you not have hanged?"

He started at her words, then seizing her hands kissed them, while he said with quivering voice:

"Pearl, you have saved me from the gallows, though you swore falsely in my favor. Never will I forget you, never!" and the cadet pressed the hands of the maiden in both his own until she cried out with pain.

"And what will you do now, Dick?" she asked, after a moment.

"Return to the academy, of course."

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow, for I cannot remain here now, Pearl."

"When I have graduated there is work for me to do, and one day it shall be done."

"But come, the shadows are creeping upon us, so let us return, and, cousin mine, may I ask you a few questions as a brother might?"

"Do not question me, Dick," and she shuddered.

"I must, for remember I am your guardian, now Rodney is dead."

"Yes, I remember, so the will of your father says."

"And you will answer me?"

"What would you ask me, Dick?"

"Who is Oscar Leighton?"

She started and answered:

"An artist."

"That I know, and a talented one too; but what else is he?"

"A gentleman."

"So he appears in all things."

"But where did you meet him?"

"At school."

"I was lying upon the river-bank one day when I fell asleep."

"I had been sketching and becoming drowsy threw myself down upon my shawl."

"I awoke to find Mr. Leighton seated in his boat near me, just finishing a sketch of me."

"I felt indignant, and he sprung ashore and earnestly begged my pardon, at the same time presenting me with the sketch."

"I could not be angry with him, and he looked over my sketches, criticised them, and after that we often met."

"I found that mother and his father were old friends, and so we have often met since."

"Mother invited him to Sleepy Hollow for a week, and that is all I can tell you of him, Dick."

"I can ask no more, Pearl; but he loves you to desperation."

"I saw that when I kissed you on my arrival yesterday afternoon, and he was green with jealousy when you testified that you were out on the water with me last night."

"I am afraid, cousin, that he will not make your life a happy one, should you become his wife."

"I am afraid not," she repeated in a low tone, and as though her thoughts were far away, and then the two walked on in silence to the mansion.

Upon reaching the mansion they were met by Oscar Leighton, who said:

"I thought that you were at the boat-house, Miss Pearl?"

"I left there to go back to the grave after my cousin, Mr. Leighton," was the reply, and the words were coldly uttered.

Just then the butler announced tea, and the little family sat down together, each one seeming to strive to drive off haunting spirits from around them.

But the effort was a dismal one, for the memory of Rodney St. Orme would not away at their bidding.

CHAPTER V.

OUTLAWED.

BACK to the military academy went Richard Dabney.

But he had not more than met his fellow-cadets than he was made to feel that the story of Rodney St. Orme's death was already known, and more, that though he had been found "not guilty," that he was believed to be really the murderer.

He heard whispers about him that Pearl Vavasour had testified falsely to save him from the gallows, and each day of his stay his friends grew fewer and fewer.

At last he was completely ostracized by his comrades, and he found himself really outlawed from every friendship he had once held.

Unable to stand this treatment, this bitter outlawry, though standing at the head of his class, he decided to resign.

It was bitter indeed for him to make this resolve, for his ambition had been to become a soldier and win fame as such.

He struggled hard to bear the slights put upon him; but all to no use, for at last he knew that his remaining could but end in one way: trouble with some of his insulters.

And so his resignation was sent in and promptly accepted.

It was plain that he was considered an outcast by all, professors as well as cadets, and he must go forth to face the world with the brand of Cain upon him, at least as far as the thoughts of his fellows went.

Back to his boyhood home he went, Sleepy Hollow, where he had passed so many happy years of his life.

Madam Vavasour was there, calm, dignified and cold in manner as was her wont.

But she seemed more so than ever to him upon his return.

Pearl was away at boarding-school, finishing her last term, and the servants went about in a gloomy, stately manner that was by no means cheerful.

That Sleepy Hollow belonged to him the cadet knew, for it was part of his inheritance, his father having desired to keep it under the name of the family for generations to come.

Dick Dabney was lord and master there, or would be in a couple of years more when he reached his majority.

And yet he seemed like a stranger in his own house.

If he gave an order the servants obeyed it, and yet he seemed to feel that they regarded him with suspicion.

While riding out on horseback one afternoon several days after his return home, he met Lela Lawrence and her father.

He hesitated, expecting them to halt and speak with him; but they passed him by without recognition.

"My God! am I to bear this cross through life?"

"No, no, it must not, shall not be!" and the face of the cadet grew pale and stern.

Several days after Dick Dabney was in the village, and he overheard a remark made regarding him, and which the speaker seemed not to care whether it reached the ears of the young cadet or not.

"That is Dick Dabney, who murdered his cousin for his money, and whom the coroner's jury whitewashed for big pay, it is said."

Instantly Richard Dabney turned upon the speaker, his face livid with rage, and by a quick, terrible blow full in the face, laid him flat upon his back.

Not a word did he speak, he merely acted, and a moment after had passed on.

"Must my hand be raised against every man?" he murmured.

"It was in my heart for an instant to kill him; but no, I conquered myself, for have I not enough to bear now?"

Mounting his horse, he rode back to his elegant home, and yet a home gloomy in spite of its luxurious surroundings.

For some days after the young cadet was moody and silent.

He went to his meals alone, shunned his aunt's society and scarcely spoke unless spoken to, even to the servants.

The fangs of remorse seemed to be gnawing into his soul, and his burden seem too heavy for such young shoulders to bear.

"Heaven have mercy! I am outlawed by all who were once my friends.

"I am an outcast among my fellow-men, and wherever I go, whatever I do, the face of Rodney St. Orme rises before me.

"I must, I will end this misery."

He was seated upon the piazza as he smoke, gazing out upon the moonlit waters of the sound, and he held between his teeth a cigar, which, in his bitter reveries, he had allowed to go out.

Rising as he spoke, he entered his own room, and for a long time sat at his table writing.

Then he arose, put on his hat and strolled out of the house down to the beach, as was his wont each night before retiring.

Along the shore he went, until the white tombs in the little burying-ground of his family glimmered in the moonlight before him, looking like grim specters.

Like an uneasy spirit, he wound his way among the trees until he at last stood at the grave of Rodney St. Orme.

The next morning when the servant went to call him to breakfast he was not in his room, and the bed showed that it had not been occupied during the night.

Search was made for him at once, and late in the afternoon a servant came in with a letter.

It was addressed to Madam Vavasour, and the servant said that he had found it upon the grave of Rodney St. Orme.

With eager hands Madam Vavasour tore it open and read:

"MY DEAR AUNT:—

"My punishment is greater than I can bear, for I am outlawed by all who know me, and I am not strong enough to bear up against such a load of anguish.

"To-night I end my sorrows, for I seek oblivion in death.

"There is no need to search for my body, for the waters will not give up their prey, until the day when all secrets shall be known.

"My inheritance from my father, as well as through poor Rodney's death, goes, by the terms of the will to Pearl, and may she know only happiness in its possession, is my only wish.

"Farewell, RICHARD D. DABNEY."

Such was the letter, and the tears welled up into the cold eyes of Madam Vavasour as she read it.

"Heaven have mercy upon him!"

"He has taken his own life!" she moaned.

And going to her room, she wrote three telegrams, one to the family attorney, another to Pearl, calling her home, and the third to Oscar Leighton, asking him to come at once to Sleepy Hollow.

Then Madam Vavasour gave orders that the mansion should again be draped in deepest black and become a house of mourning.

CHAPTER VI.

A TEXAN AT SEA.

A VESSEL was dashing along over a tempest-swept sea, her masts gone and her hull almost a wreck upon the waters.

It was a schooner, and she had been a trim craft until caught in one of those violent tornados that often sweep over Southern seas.

Upon her decks stood her captain and crew, and several passengers, perhaps half a score in all, and their faces, as the lightning-flashes revealed them, showed that they realized that death stared them in the face.

The passengers consisted of three men, two of them heavily-bearded, rough-looking specimens of humanity, and the third a tall, fine-looking man, whose odd dress showed him to be a frontiersman.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, top-boots, and a hunting jacket embroidered with beads, while he wore upon his head a Mexican sombrero.

About his waist was a belt, and in it were a pair of serviceable revolvers and a bowie-knife.

He had been North "to see his kinfolk," as he had said, and was on his way back to Texas, where he had lived since he was a lad.

He had put himself down on the schooner's register as

"LONE STAR LUKE,

Rio Grande Ranger,

San Antonio,

Texas."

If he had another name, no one on the vessel knew it.

He was a man of fine physique, and his face showed intelligence, resolution, and indomitable pluck.

In the tornado he was the coolest man on board, not excepting the captain, and now, as he clung to the taffrail while the schooner drove along over the waters, he showed not an atom of dread.

"Pard Cap'n, it do look as tho' we were going to be fish-bait," he said, quickly.

"Yes, the chances are against us, sir; but I never give up hope," replied the captain.

"Nor I, and I've come out of some tight places in my time; but then I had a footing on the ground, and here it's some miles to bottom, with a chance o' going clear through to China, as I've heard tell."

"I were in beautiful luck to go to the old home on Long Island and see the good kinsfolk, for I guess this will finish me," and Lone Star spoke with an air of perfect resignation.

"I guess you are right, Mate Lone Star, for we are driving right upon the Bahama Islands, and we'll go to pieces within the hour."

"Does yer hear that, pard?" and Lone Star Luke turned to the two other passengers.

"We bears it, and you bet we doesn't want ter," was the surly reply of one of the men.

"Then, if you heerd it, why don't yer act accordin'?"

"Does yer want us ter pray?"

"No, fer durned ef I believes prayers would save yer souls, if yer faces is a mirror o' what yer has within yer in ther way o' goodness."

"But I wants yer ter do yer duty like men."

"What's left fer us ter do?"

"You has a prisoner in irons down in ther hold, hasn't yer?"

"Yas."

"Yer say yer is takin' him ter Mexico ter be tried fer murder he committed there!"

"Yas, and he'll hang."

"Waal, then, be hain't born ter be drowned, so ji t go down and set him free, so that be kin have a chance for his life with the rest of us, when we goes upon ther rocks."

"It's more merciful to let him drown than hang," said one of the men, gruffly.

"Pard, that may be your creed, but it hain't mine."

"Ther man has had no trial yet, so yer don't know that he is guilty, and whar death stares us all in the face yer must give him a chance with ther rest o' us."

"Must, did yer say?" doggedly asked one of the men.

"Yas, must were ther word I used, pard, and I meant it."

"Waal, we don't give him a chance, that are all."

"Then I does."

"You!"

"Yas, me, Lone Star Luke, Texas ranger o' San Antone, will do it."

"How will yer?"

"I'll jist step down and fetch him on deck."

"What'll we be doing?"

"Swimmin' in ther sea, ef yer gets in my way, pard."

As he spoke Lone Star Luke stepped forward, as though to carry out his threat to free the prisoner.

Instantly the two men sprung before him; but, quick as a flash a revolver was in each hand and they covered the prisoner's guards, while the words came quick and stern:

"Hands up, pard, and I'll trouble you for them keys that unlock the prisoner's irons, for I says he sha'n't die like a rat in a hole," cried the Texan.

The men were fairly caught, for they were not armed, their weapons being in the cabin.

"Hand over them keys!" repeated Lone Star Luke, and with an oath one of the men obeyed.

Taking them in one hand, and keeping a revolver in the other still covering the men the Texan went forward and made his way into the hold, a sailor obeying his command to accompany him with a lantern.

Below decks sat a young man heavily ironed and chained to the deck. His face was very pale, but it bore the stamp of refinement, and the stamp of courage rested upon each feature.

He was well dressed, had the air of a gentleman, and his face was one to remember if once seen, though it wore an expression of almost despair and upon the mouth was a look of full bitterness.

He looked up as the lantern flashed upon him, and seemed surprised at beholding a man like the Texan on board ship.

"Pard, we is a-going to ther deuce pretty

peert, ther cap'n o' this craft says, and hearin' as you was aboard in the charge o' constables who was carryin' you to Mexico, I told 'em as how they should set you free. They thought dif'rent, but I argifled ther matter with my revolvers and they was convinced, so I jest come down ter invite you on deck and give you a chance with ther rest o' us.

"I hain't had ther pleasure o' seein' yer afore, but yer don't look like a bad man clean through, and I'll interdooce myself as Lone Star Luke o' Texas at your service, pard, as long as this old ark floats."

The Texan was unlocking the irons as he spoke, and the prisoner smiled at his quaint manner, while he answered:

"You are a noble man, my friend, and from my heart I thank you."

"Don't do it, for I acts only from duty; but, what might be your name, pard?"

"Darling."

"Darlin'? Waal, that's what I called my gal, years ago, when I hed one."

"My name is Dick Darling."

"Waal, I'll call yer Pard Dick, for ef I was heerd callin' yer Darling folks would think you was a gal in breeches, and yer is good enough lookin' fer 'em to think so."

"Now, Pard Dick, let us git out of this rat hole, for we is liable ter—"

He said no more, for as he uttered the last word there came a terrific crash, a shock, and the sea poured over the devoted craft in fiercest torrents.

The schooner had driven ashore with fearful force and was a wreck.

CHAPTER VII.

SHIPWRECKED.

THE shock of the vessel striking upon the reefs, threw the Texan, seaman and prisoner down; but they were quickly upon their feet and making their way on deck.

The seaman seemed half scared out of his wits, but the Texan and the prisoner were perfectly cool, the former helping the latter along, for he was stiff from long confinement.

"We has struck, Pard Dick, that are sart'in; but we'll soon be on deck and know if it's die or live."

"The vessel seems to rest solidly at least," replied the prisoner coolly, and then they reached the gangway and a moment after passed up through the hatch to the deck.

The vessel had struck upon a reef that encircled a rugged island, and was hard and fast upon it, some quarter of a mile from the shore.

The dawn was breaking, so that those on deck could see about them.

The captain, his crew, and the two constables stood amidships and were anxiously looking about them, as though fearful that the wreck would go to pieces.

The storm was abating rapidly, however, and this the Texan saw, for he said:

"She's stuck fast, pard, but she's solid as a rock, and as the storm are getting winded, I guess we hain't to drown jist yet."

The two constables eyed their prisoner curiously as he joined the group with the Texan, and the gaze of the captain and his men also fell upon the splendid form and handsome face of the young man.

"Pards, ef it are to be war between you and me, jist declare whenever you gits ready, for I intends ter perfect this here young pilgrim, so don't make no mistake."

"He are misfunit, and this shipwreck sets him free jist now, so let us all work together for our general good and git out of a bad scrape of we can; but ef you means ter act dirt towards a man in misfortune, I'm right here to say no. Now what are your declaration, pard?"

"We want no trouble, and we were but doing our duty in taking the man to Mexico."

"We know nothing about his crime, but we was told he were guilty and paid to take him there for trial; but if we is shipwrecked we can't do it, and that's all there is about it," said one of the men.

"I do not blame these men, sir, for I believe they are only doing their duty; but a kind fate has come to my rescue, and I shall make the best of it to remain free," said Dick Darling, calmly.

"You is right, pard; but now let us all be harmonious, and you, cap'n, jist see what you kin do to git us out o' a bad pickle."

"We have one good boat and can go ashore when the sea runs down; but if I am not mis-taken, this is a wreckers' island."

"Does yer mean it are ther abidin'-place o' them sea cut-throats I has heerd tell on?" asked Lone Star Luke.

"Yes, for they will commit any crime for gold."

"Waal, I guesses we might give 'em a surprise party ef they tackled us, for we is thirteen all told."

"An unlucky number," muttered the mate.

"Waal, I'd a heap rather it were thirteen than twelve, if it is to be a fight we'll have."

"That man will be our Jonah," growled one of the constables, with a glance at Dick Darling.

"Pard, I knows a Jonah a whale will git a chance ter swallow—and he won't be a lively Jonah, nuther, when ther whale spits him ashore, ef he don't keep a civil tongue in his teeth."

"Mebbe you know as to whom I are alludin'; ef not, ef yer goes inter ther cabing and looks at yerself in a mirror, yer'll see ther gent."

There was a threat in the manner of Lone Star Luke, which caused the constables to feel that they had better keep quiet just then.

In the mean time, the captain of the wrecked schooner was gazing shoreward with his glass.

"Mates, this is the island of the Sea Wolves," he said.

"Wreckers?" asked Dick Darling.

"Yes."

"Do you know their force?"

"Some score or more, sir," answered the captain with real respect in voice and manner as he addressed the prisoner.

"Then we can beat them off I think and perhaps seize their boat and leave the island in it."

"A good suggestion, sir, and we'll act upon it."

"Pard Cap'n, I are use ter prairie and chaparral fightin', but maybe I kin give yer a word fer sea scrimmagin' and it are thet yer let about half o' us go ashore so as not ter show yer whole force."

"Then ef them pirates come aboard we kin entertain 'em more handsome."

This plan was adopted, and the Texan, prisoner, two constables and a couple of the sailors went down into the cabin.

It was now bright day, and the wind was rising, revealing the full outlines of the island.

It was a wild-looking spot, with bold forbidding shores, and it seemed to be entirely surrounded by reefs and jagged rocks.

The schooner had driven hard upon the reef, and, as the sea was running down it was no longer shaken by the waves which at first had pounded its stout sides so heavily.

As the sun rose out of the sea the mists cleared away and the captain was cursing that he was on an island frequented by the wreckers known as Sea Wolves.

"They visit the islands and place false beacons upon them, and lure vessels to destruction, though they pretend only to gather up wreckage and cast-away cargoes."

"If they come out to us it will be in their boats," said the captain to Lone Star Luke who was seated in the cabin companionway.

"But is you sart'in that they is on ther island?"

"Yes, for I saw two men skulking along the shore, and they have their little wrecking craft anchored in there somewhere— Ah! here they come now!"

As the captain spoke a small schooner of twenty tons shot out from what appeared to be a solid cliff and began to beat out toward the wrecked craft.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SEA WOLVES.

THOSE on board the wrecked schooner watched the coming of the craft from the island with considerable interest.

Those in the cabin had gotten together what weapons they could find and awaited the result.

The vessel coming out belonged to a class of West Indian craft that are stanch in a blow and very swift sailors.

The captain of the wrecked schooner knew her to be one of the fleet of wreckers, who were generally known as Sea Wolves.

Though the vessels-of-war were ever on the alert against these Sea Wolves, they were so cunning as seldom to be caught in acts of outlawry, and so continued their deeds from year to year.

It was said by them that if they found a vessel in distress, with a small crew, they were only too willing to put all on board to death and take possession.

Many small vessels had disappeared from view and it was to the Sea Wolves that their loss was attributed, and not unjustly so, as will be seen.

The vessel came rapidly on, standing up well

under the stiff breeze, cutting through the rough waters like a knife, and beating out with wonderful ease in the face of the half-gale that was blowing.

As she drew near the reef she luffed up sharp and lay to, not a ship's length away from the wreck.

Upon her decks were some fifteen men, dark-faced as Indians, bearded and with the cut of desperadoes about them.

"Ho the wreck!" hailed the man at the tiller.

"Ahoy the schooner," responded the captain of the wrecked vessel.

"Who are you, whither bound and what is your cargo?"

"The schooner Glide, out of New York, bound for Galveston and Vera Cruz and with cargo of general merchandise."

"How many are on board?"

"You see my crew."

"Do you know on what island you have been wrecked?"

"Yes, one of the Wreckers' Islands of the Bahamas."

"Will you turn over your vessel to me in return for carrying yourself and crew to an American port?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You are Sea Wolves or you would not wish pay to help men in distress."

"Granted we are, what then?"

"I will keep on board my vessel until help arrives."

"No help will reach you here!"

"You do not know all that I do."

"What do you know?"

"Come on board and find out," was the defiant rejoinder of the skipper.

"I'll do it when this sea runs down, and you and your crew will have to take the consequences," was the threatening reply.

The craft then put back for the shore, putting into an inner harbor through an opening in the cliff not visible from the wreck.

Thus several hours passed away, and the wind almost died out, the sea ran down, and once more the little craft appeared.

There was deep water close to the reef, and the wrecker craft could come alongside.

From there it was but a few rods over the rocks to where the wreck lay.

Landing, they could board the wreck and carry her, if not beaten off.

Those on board the wreck had meanwhile prepared as best they could for the attack.

Bales of goods had been brought on deck and placed along the bulwarks as a breastwork, and all the weapons on board had been loaded and placed ready at hand.

As the wreckers would doubtless land all their force, and their vessel be moored against the reef, Dick Darling suggested that the party bidding in the cabin had better slip over the sea side of the wreck and stand ready to rush on board the schooner and seize her when her crew advanced to the attack.

"You has a level head, pard," said Lone Star Luke, and the captain also decided that it would be a good idea to so attack the Sea Wolves.

The arrangements were accordingly made, the Texan, prisoner, two constables, and two seamen going out of the stern-ports to the reef, and creeping along among the rocks until they reached a hiding-place near where the wrecker craft must land.

Then out came the little vessel, and it was seen that there were fully a score of men on board, while the glass showed that they were armed to the teeth.

Straight up to the reef she glided, and the wrecker leader called out:

"Ahoy! will you surrender the wreck?"

"If you wish it, come and take it, for I shall defend it."

"I have ten men on board, and we'll fight for our craft, wrecked though she is," was the reply of the American skipper.

A derisive laugh greeted this response, and the wreckers threw themselves over the bulwarks upon the reef.

Their vessel was made fast, and the men, under the leadership of their chief, started for the wreck, leaving but a couple of men on board of their schooner.

With a yell they started toward the wreck, but were met by a volley that staggered them, and dropped several of their number.

But they pressed on and had nearly reached the side of the wreck, when they heard shouts in their rear.

They halted in consternation only to see the

two men left on their vessel fall under the fire of a party who had appeared as if by magic from the rocks and had boarded their schooner.

They hesitated in indecision, for the fire from the wreck had already been more severe than they had supposed it would be, and while they halted there they were between two fires, for Lone Star and his men were opening upon them rapidly.

In dismay they charged back toward their vessel, but she was already free and drifted off, Dick Darling, who was a good sailor, springing to the helm.

Then the wreckers turned again upon the wreck, but the fire upon them was hot, from Lone Star as well as the skipper and his men, and with more than half their number either dead or wounded the balance bounded along the reef and took refuge among the rocks.

Then the schooner ran again alongside of the reef and Lone Star and his party landed, while a man carrying a white flag was seen advancing from the hiding-place of the Sea Wolves, who had suddenly found the tides turned upon them.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TABLES TURNED.

THAT the wreckers were completely cowed by their defeat, there was not the shadow of a doubt.

They still outnumbered the wrecked crew; but what they had failed to do when considering themselves masters of the situation they were well aware they could not accomplish when all was in favor of the strangers.

They therefore were willing to come to terms and so sent a man with a flag of truce to see what could be done in the master.

They however began by braggadocio, for the man when met by Lone Star Luke said:

"I have come from our captain to say he will let you alone and take his vessel and go."

"You be a durned fool, pard, so you can tell your captain."

"He will attack you again."

"Let him do it, for we would like to wipe the rest of you out."

"What will you do about it then?"

"We'll jist take your craft and set sail from here, while if yer wish ter go back to your island, you kin hev a boat and then skip."

"You mean to take our vessel?"

"Sart'in, for she are our pirit prize, don't yer diskiver?"

"The cap'n will not let you have the vessel without fighting for her."

"We has fought for her, and she's our craft, and we intends ter keep her."

"Now go and tell yer cap'n ter git out soon as he wants ter and ter look arter his wounded, fer don't yer git heart-sick at ther groaning o' ther poor fellows?"

"I'll go and report," said the man, and he departed.

Returning to the schooner, on board of which the wrecked crew were now all assembled, Lone Star told of what had occurred.

"Had you not better keep one of their men as a pilot, sir, for we cannot find the way out, even after we get the vessel ready to go?" said Dick Darling.

"Pard, your head hain't hollow, by no means."

"Are it, cap'n?" said Lone Star.

"It is a wise suggestion; but here comes the man again."

The same man was now seen coming back, and he reported to Lone Star, who went to meet him, that the captain said he would give them a craft that was in the basin, to depart from the island in, if they would let him have his vessel to return ashore in, and they might keep the wounded men as hostages, to show his good faith.

"They hain't worth no more nor dead men, and they is most of 'em dying now."

"No, sir, we keeps the schooner, and you kin jist pile by to ther boat yonder, take yer dead and wounded with you, and light out."

"Does yer hear?"

"Yes, but the captain won't agree."

"Then he can go to thunder," and the Texan was turning away when he called out:

"My man, does yer wish to tarn honest?"

"How do you mean?"

"If you does, when the others go ashore, you come to us and I'll find gold-dust for you."

"What am I to do?"

"Run this craft out to sea when we gits ready to go."

"They would kill me."

It's catchin' down in Texas, whar I sojourn, afore hanging."

"I'll tell you," and the wrecker spoke in a low tone.

"I don't like it here, and I was roped in, so if you give me a lift when I get ashore in the port you make, I'll go with you."

"You know how to run the craft out of this reef-harbor?"

"In fair weather, yes."

"Well, you come to us, pard, and I'll fix you squar'."

"Can't you, when we go to our boat, start out to meet me with a white flag, and then seize me, for I'll be watched after I get on the island, and it will be hard to get away."

"I hates to do anything under a white flag as hain't squar'."

"But what do you care, when those men are little else than pirates?"

"That's so, and I'll think it over," was the cautious reply of the scout.

The wrecker now returned to his comrades, and the scout went back on board the schooner.

Soon it was seen that the wreckers were going to accept the terms offered them, for they appeared in view, and came slowly and with sullen mien down toward the beach on the inner shore of the reach.

Some of them were slightly wounded, and all of them were mad as hornets.

But there was no help for them and they filed sullenly down to the boat, which the skipper had placed for them a hundred yards from the schooner.

"Hold, pard, take yer dead and wounded with you."

"We don't want 'em," roared Lone Star Luke.

The wreckers obeyed with bad grace, and then Luke called out:

"Pard, I wants yer fer a object."

Boldly he sprung over the bulwarks, and advanced toward the wreckers.

The man who had come under flag of truce walked toward him and the two met.

"Pard, I didn't come out under no false colors as yer sees; but you is my game at the point of my revolver."

As the Texan spoke he covered the wrecker, and marched him back, no unwilling prisoner, to the schooner.

The wreckers halted and seemed excited.

For a moment they appeared about to recklessly charge the schooner.

But the Texan called out:

"Better not be rash, pard, for we is in fightin' trim."

"We wants this gerloot as a pilot, and you bets we has got him, for we knows you had a ide we couldn't git out o' this hole with yer vessel arter we got her."

"Ta-ta, pard, and don't you tackle nothin' in future until yer knows what yer is about."

The wreckers swore in as many languages as they had command of, but the Texan shouted:

"We is goin' ter indulge in some pistol practice right in your direction, so you mou't git hurted ef yer remains in range."

"See here!"

As he spoke Lone Star sent a bullet from his rifle, which he had carried North with him, right over the heads of the wreckers.

They took the hint quickly, and getting into their boat pushed off, rowing toward the island.

The wrecked crew watched them until they were out of sight through the opening in the cliff, and then Lone Star said:

"Now, cap'n, it are your trick, and ther sooner yer begin biz ther better all round, fer this pirit pilgrim here tells me thar is a dozen more galoots ashore of them fellers."

"I will put on board the schooner all the most valuable of my cargo, and then we can set sail," said the wrecker.

The men then set to work, one and all, transferring the stores and most valuable of the cargo from the wreck to the little schooner.

The craft was roomy, having been built with a view to carrying booty, and all of the cargo that was not damaged was put on board.

It was now dark, and the schooner was hauled off from the shore and anchored, while the wrecker, Dick Darling, the captain and Lone Star volunteered to keep watch.

The night passed away, however, without alarm, and at dawn they returned to finish with the cargo from the wreck.

This done, the wreck was set on fire, and the deeply-laden little schooner stood away from the reef. The wrecker was at the helm, and by his side stood the Texan.

"Pard Pirit, I believes yer is all right; but shu'd yer make a slip ag'in' us, yer will be ther fu'st man o' this outfit that goes ter Kingdom Come," and Lone Star held his revolver in his hand.

"I intend to act square, sir, and as a proof of it, I will tell you that I believe the wreckers will attack you in boats, as we round the point of yonder cliff."

"We have to run close in, and if they dash out suddenly, for we have little room, they will be upon us in an instant, and their force will nearly double yours now."

"Pard, you is a brick; and we'll tie to you sart'in, when we gits out o' this; but yer'll excuse me ef I still keeps my shooter handy about yer?"

"I don't wonder that you doubt me," and the wrecker smiled.

Then he added:

"But don't forget that the wreckers are doubtless ready to dash out upon you in their boats."

"Pard Cap'n, yer hears that?"

"Well, just have all ther boys ready with their weapons, and I guesses as how we'll give 'em a set-back."

The arrangements were quickly made, though not so as to attract attention from the wreckers, should they be watching them.

The schooner was now nearing the cliff, and suddenly, out from the channel pass, shot two boats filled with men.

They were not a dozen oar lengths away, and, but for the warning of the wrecker pilot they would surely have gained a footing upon the vessel.

As it was, they were received with a scattering fire, and, when they got alongside of the schooner, they were met with a bold front.

Wielding an old cutlass in his grasp, Dick Darling clove the wrecker leader to the heart, and then drove the blade into the body of another.

This settled the combat, for the wreckers sprung back into their boats and shoved off, while the schooner swept on through the narrow channel and made toward the open sea.

CHAPTER X.

THE TEXAN CHIPS IN.

UNDER the pilotage of the wrecker the little schooner passed rapidly through the channel leading from the island and gained open water.

The captain then decided to go on with his cargo to Galveston and there report his loss, so the schooner was put away for that port, and was soon leaving the wreckers' island far astern.

Hardly had her course been laid, when the two constables, who had been talking together for some time in a low tone, came aft where Dick Darling stood, and said:

"Now, sir, we must again make you a prisoner."

"What do you mean?" indignantly asked the young man.

"Just what I say, for you are our prisoner."

"I was, though under false charges."

"Captain, let me tell you that I was arrested one night at my home and by these and four other men."

"I was told that I was wanted for a murder committed in Mexico, and that that Government had gotten a permit to take me there."

"I knew there was some mistake; but I was powerless to argue, so I did what I could not help doing."

"I was brought on board your vessel in irons, as you know, and so was on my way when the shipwreck released me."

"These men have gotten the wrong man, as I can prove when given a chance; but having been set free by the wreck, and feeling that I am not guilty of the crime they accuse me of, I shall not again submit to their making me a prisoner."

"Bully for you, Pard Dick," cried the Texan.

The captain seemed worried, and replied:

"I am sorry, sir; but I must sustain these officers of the law."

"A naval officer came on board my vessel and engaged passage for a prisoner and two guards to Vera Cruz and paid for it."

"He told me that I must uphold his officers in taking the prisoner in safety, and I feel that I must do so, as my duty compels it."

"Then you can do as you please; but I will not submit!" and the young prisoner stepped back and stood at bay, grasping the cutlass he had used so well against the wreckers to defend himself with.

"You shall die, then!" shouted one of the officers, and he leveled his pistol and pulled trigger.

But his arm was struck up at the instant with a force that sent the weapon flying into the sea,

and Lone Star Luke confronted the two guards, his weapons covering their hearts.

"Pards, I chips in right here."

"Ther cap'n kin do as he likes, but he's got ter stand off right here."

"But for that gent he'd 'a' lost this craft, and our lives with it, fer I thought all were done fer when Pard Dick cut ther wrecker cap'n down and kilt ther big sailor man ahind him."

"That settled it, and I says this young man hain't gwine ter be put back in no irons."

"You was ter take him ter Vera Cruz."

"Well you kin cruise on thar yerselves; but Dick Darlin' and me bids you adoo at Galveston, and ef yer don't like it, just come ashore and tackle us."

"Here, Pard Dick, take this weepin' o' mine, and ef these gents goes ter give yer any more trouble, my advice to yer, and it are solid, is ter just draw and shoot, and yer kin do it, fer I seen yer shoot when them pirts were on ther reef, and yer hit dead center."

"Pards, hain't yer satisfied?"

It was evident that the constables were not, for they turned to the captain and said:

"We appeal to you to help us."

"Cap'n, don't you be no fool, for I means business, every time."

But the captain felt that it was his duty to side with the officers of the law, and said:

"I must aid the officers, Texas."

"Waal, that only makes three ag'in' two, and I has faced bigger odds many a time," said the Texan.

"You forget my crew."

"Waal, I'm a-thinking your crew hev got horse sense, and some of 'em has, I knows."

"Then thar's ther wrecker, and he sides with us, so put it to yer sea pards, cap'n, and let us have the thing squar'd up."

"Rather than cause bloodshed I will submit," said Dick Darling, for a glance showed him that the crew were taking sides with each party, and that a desperate conflict must follow.

"No, you don't, pard."

"Yes, I will not permit bloodshed on my account, so yield."

"Officers, I am again your prisoner."

"No, pard!" and Lone Star sprung forward, while the wrecker left the wheel and came to his side, the crew also dividing equally and coming aft.

"Hold! I will not have this."

"I submit!" cried Dick Darling, and even Lone Star Luke stepped back at his commanding tones.

"Ef yer says so, pard, I give in; but I think yer is a durned softy ter do it, fer we kin run ther machine ag'in' 'em."

"No, I will not be a bone of contention, so officers, I am again your prisoner."

He held out his hands for the irons, as one of the officers drew them from his pocket, and the captain said:

"I ask you that he be confined in the cabin, not the hold."

The officers demurred at this, but seeing that Lone Star meant to chip in again, they consented, and ten minutes after Dick Darling found himself confined in the cabin of the little schooner, again in irons and chained to a ringbolt in the floor, while one of the two constables was to keep guard constantly over him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TEXAN'S PLOT.

THE little schooner captured from the Sea Wolves, went swiftly on its way into the Gulf.

Her skipper was a good sailor, and it had not been through any act of his that his vessel had been wrecked.

He congratulated himself that it was no more, and though two of the crew had been killed and several wounded, he yet had ample force to work his vessel.

Then he had saved the most valuable part of his cargo and all of his own and the private property of the passengers and crew.

The captain's sympathy was with the unfortunate prisoner.

He had seen how bravely he acted in the fights with the wreckers, and it was through his suggestion that the plan was made, and successfully carried out to seize the vessel of the pirates when they would attack the wreck.

But the skipper was a stickler for duty, and the Government officers in charge of the prisoner he felt that it was his duty to support.

The handsome young prisoner he knew nothing about, and he certainly did not look like a guilty man, as he was charged to be.

The Texan and the scout talked this matter over time and again, for Lone Star Luke was in the habit of "standin' picket duty" as he ex-

pressed it every night with the skipper when he was at the wheel.

The Texan liked the captain, but he wisely gave away none of his confidence, for he read the character of the sailor at a glance, and knew that his idea of duty would prevent his giving him any aid in a little plan he had on hand.

And Lone Star did have a plan on hand all his own.

"Thet young pilgrim won't see Mexico this time, sart'in as shootin'," he said to himself.

As for the two constables the scout had no use for them in the world.

He did not like the way they acted, and came to the conclusion that they were working for a reward offered for the prisoner rather than to see justice done for a murder.

"Like as not ther's gold offered on his head, and that's what they's anxious to finger," he said.

The two officers also held aloof from him.

In fact, they seemed really to fear him.

They were uneasy when he entered the cabin, and, as though anxious to tease them, he was wont to go often to have a talk with the prisoner.

"Let him come on deck, fer he hain't goin' ter jump overboard," he said.

The officers hesitated, but the captain made the request also, and so Dick Darling was allowed to spend most of the time on deck.

But then both of the officers would be with him, as though fearful he would escape them in some mysterious way.

At last Key West was left astern, and the wind was fair for a rapid run across the Gulf, and in due time the schooner dropped anchor off Galveston.

It was night, and the Texan at once went ashore.

He said he wanted to get something to drink, and added:

"Pards, when I come back I'll treat you."

He kept his word, too, for by midnight he was back again, coming off in a shore-boat, and everybody on the schooner was awakened for a drink.

The prisoner refused to drink, in spite of all urging; but the Texan's heart was mellow with liquor, and he even got friendly with the two officers, both of whom were most willing to have a nip of the liquors.

The captain had one fault, and that was to get on a spree at times, and, urged by the scout, he was unable to refuse, and so joined in the carousal.

The Texan had also brought off with him a tempting lunch, and he was generous to all, for the crew shared alike with those in the cabin.

At length the potations so numerous began to take effect, and the scout fell over drunk, lying on the floor.

The captain went on deck, crawling up the companionway on all fours, and then decided to rest, and lay his length in a state of utter unconsciousness.

The guards fought manfully to bear up, but one at last went to his bunk, telling the other that he would relieve him in an hour or two.

This the man left on duty did not even hear, for he was snoring sweetly ere his comrade had departed.

On deck all was quiet, and in his bunk lay the prisoner, his eyes wide open and a smile upon his face.

At length the head of the scout was raised from the floor, his loud snoring ceased, and he glanced about him.

His manner and look was certainly not that of a drunken man.

Rising to his feet he went toward the companionway.

Upon deck he found the captain lying there, fast asleep, and amidships were the men, every one of them asleep.

No, not all of them, for one arose and came aft.

"They're fixed, pard?" asked the scout.

"All of them, sir."

"Well, take ther lantern and turn it thrice around your head, facing seaward."

"Do this until you gets a answerin' signal, and then yer'll see a boat a-comin', so let her come alongside under ther stern."

"I'll go an' unlock ther prisoner."

The scout returned to the cabin, bent over the sleeping officers, and took from his pocket the key of the irons that were locked upon the ankles and wrists of Dick Darling.

A moment after the prisoner stepped out of his bunk, and slowly and noiselessly followed the scout from the cabin.

Reaching the deck, they saw the wrecker standing there, and he whispered:

"The boat's alongside, sir."

"All right, pard, we'll percede ter occupy her."

Over the side the two went, the wrecker followed and the boat pushed off, and, urged by two oarsmen, pulled for the shore.

"They certainly drank deeply, to sleep so soundly," said the prisoner, referring to the guards and others on the schooner.

"I went to a friend o' mine as keeps a p'izen shop—"

"Poison!" exclaimed the prisoner, excitedly.

"Waal, a drug-shop; but I calls all medicines p'izen, pard."

"Well?"

"He perscribed a sleepin' portion fer me ter put in ther licker, not enough ter hurt, but just a quantity ter make 'em sleep like they hed no conscious; but I'm reckonin' they'll hev heads on 'em in ther mornin' until ther hats won't fit."

"You took big chances to serve me, my friend, and when you motioned to me not to drink the liquor, I thought you had a motive for it."

"Life's a big chance itself, pard."

"How can I thank you, my friend?"

"We'll talk o' that arter awhile; but now we must git out o' town as quick as we kin, and our pard here kin go his way, though he'd better lay in hidin' fer a day or two, or disguise himself by cropping off them long whiskers and ha'r."

"Mebbe they'd not know yer then; but here are yer little gold-dust I promised yer, so as we is ashore now, I'll jest say, give up piratin', and here's my grip in good-by."

The scout grasped the wrecker's hand as he spoke, and a moment after the boat touched the shore.

The boatman seemed to be known to the scout for he led the way, the wrecker going in another direction after landing.

CHAPTER XII.

OSCAR LEIGHTON, ARTIST.

LET US now return to Sleepy Hollow Manor again, where, it will be remembered the house was cast in deep mourning by the mysterious ending of the life of its young master, Richard Dabney.

The letter of the young cadet found upon the grave of Rodney St. Orme, was proof to all of the suicide of the unfortunate young man.

All were convinced that remorse for his killing of St. Orme, for no one seemed to have a doubt that he had done so, had driven him to take his own life.

The telegrams sent by Madam Vavasour had been promptly answered by the coming of those telegraphed for, and the next day found Lawyer Lennox, Oscar Leighton and Pearl Vavasour at Sleepy Hollow.

The letter left by Dick Dabney was read and reread, and it left no doubt in the minds of all that the youth had been driven to his desperate act.

Madam Vavasour told how moody he had been of late, and that he had said his friends at the military school had completely outlawed him from their society, while the neighbors about Sleepy Hollow had not noticed him upon his return home.

There was a general search made for the body, and a reward was offered for its recovery by Lawyer Lennox: but the days passed away and no trace of it was found.

The terms of Judge Dabney's will made Pearl Vavasour the heiress to the wealth which had been divided among the three cousins, for in case of the death of either the share of the deceased was to be divided among the two survivors.

This also gave to the beautiful young heiress the estate of Sleepy Hollow, and Madam Vavasour almost forgot her grief in the great good fortune that had befallen her daughter.

"Poor Rodney was killed by Richard on account of his insane jealousy of him, for he feared St. Orme would marry Pearl, with whom the boy was also in love."

"I would not hint this to Pearl, to make her unhappy, but it was best that poor Richard should die than live the life of remorse that would have been his."

So Madam Vavasour had said to Lawyer Lennox.

"Then you believe that your daughter swore as she did to save her cousin?" asked the lawyer.

"Surely; though I think she believed him innocent," was the wily response of the fond mother.

The lawyer was puzzled.

He could not solve the mystery; but the will was plain, and there was nothing to do but to place the lovely heiress in full possession of her fortune.

Pearl was urged by her mother to give up school and remain at Sleepy Hollow; but she said that she preferred to return and graduate, and, after ten days passed at home, determined upon her departure.

During the ten days at home the artist, Oscar Leighton, had been the guest of Madam Vavasour daily at dinner, though he was stopping at the hotel in the village.

This gave rise to the rumor that Pearl Vavasour was engaged to him, and the young artist found himself envied by all of the beaux living near Sleepy Hollow.

It was the last day of Pearl's stay at home before returning to school.

Oscar Leighton and Lawyer Lennox had both dined at the manor, and after dinner the young artist asked Pearl to join him 'n a stroll.

"Will you and Lawyer Lennox come along, mamma?" asked Pearl.

But Madam Vavasour feigned fatigue, and the lawyer seemed to prefer to enjoy his cigar seated upon the piazza.

Pearl was in deep mourning, and it set off her exquisite complexion and red-gold hair, for she looked very beautiful.

It was late in the afternoon, so she wore no hat, and the two set off down the gravel walk toward the beach.

"Let us go for a row, Pearl," said the artist, and he turned his fine eyes tenderly upon her.

He was a handsome man, this Oscar Leighton, older evidently than he looked, and with the easy, polished manners of a man of the world.

He had a darkly-bronzed face, and one that was full of character and intelligence.

He had told Pearl that he was an orphan, had been born South and had been left to make his own way in the world from the time he had graduated at an academy and been given a thousand dollars, his inheritance, and told to build up his fortune on that.

He had passionately loved art, and purchasing a horse and wagon had started out to build up his fortune and win a name.

For years he had drifted about, going from land to land, painting, enjoying life, making a good living and, ever restless, always roving.

Such was the artist, and certainly he was a man to win the heart of any fair maiden, with his striking face, superb form and fascinating manners.

And yet Pearl did not look exactly happy in his company, and somewhat pettishly replied, in answer to his invitation to take a row:

"No, I do not care to go upon the water."

"Let us walk."

"As you please," and he turned down the highway.

"Let us go this way," and Pearl turned to the rightabout.

He did likewise without a word and they walked on in silence until they came to the road branching off to the point, where was the Dabney burying-ground.

"You do not care to go that way?" said Oscar Leighton, as Pearl turned off from the highway.

"Yes."

"It is a gloomy spot to visit at best."

"I wish to go there; but if you do not care to come you can return to the house," she said impatiently.

"I will come of course, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"And I with you."

"Then we both will be satisfied," he replied with a smile, and the two walked on to the little burying-ground.

At the request of Pearl the artist opened the gate and they stepped within, stopping by the grave of Rodney St. Orme, while Oscar Leighton raised his hat and stood with uncovered head out of respect to the sacred spot.

For a moment both were silent, and the artist saw tears dimming the eyes of the young girl.

Suddenly she turned toward him and said:

"Mr. Leighton, that grave holds a secret I would give much to fathom."

CHAPTER XIII.

A SECRET MARRIAGE.

The remark of the young girl seemed to deeply interest the man.

He turned his fine eyes upon her in a wistful sort of way, and replied:

"What secret does the grave hold for you, Pearl?"

"One that I hope some day will be removed."

"Now I cannot say more."

Then both were for a moment silent, and Pearl suddenly broke in with:

"Do you know why I came here with you?"

"I do not."

"I return to school to-morrow."

"I am aware of that."

"I will soon complete my school-days and then return to Sleepy Hollow to become its mistress."

"So I know, Pearl."

"Do you know that I would give much if I was only free once more."

"Free?" and the man started.

"Yes."

"Why would you be free, Pearl?"

She seemed deeply moved for a moment, and then said:

"I am so young, Oscar, I do not know my own heart, and you know that it was unfair in you to bind me as you did."

"I can only plead my great love for you, Pearl, and the fear of losing you."

"But you forgave me for that, and you have said that you loved me."

"I thought that I did; but I now know that it was not love that I felt for you, at least, the love that I could feel for a man whose wife I was."

The artist fairly turned pale at this, and asked with evident emotion:

"Pearl, it cuts me to the heart to have you speak so."

"Oscar Leighton, let us thoroughly understand each other."

"A year ago, I met you, as you know by accident."

"Your daring, in having sketched me while I lay asleep upon the river-bank, won my admiration, your exquisite little sketch, and your giving it to me, added to the romance of our meeting, caused me to feel a regard for you that I mistook for love."

"Our meetings were wrong, for they were clandestine, and I have only myself to blame that our friendship increased."

"You made acquaintances in the town, and can I ever forget the day that we all attended a picnic on the island in the river?"

"We were carried away with the joy of the occasion, and when a mock marriage was suggested, I yielded to your request and stood up with you."

"It did not seem very real then, for all of us were joking, and even serious-faced old Professor Tolbert, who gave me away, was joking about it, and said that he was sorry not to be the groom."

"A stranger, your friend, performed the ceremony, and with its ending I considered it as but a joke."

"Then, some days after, I met you on the river-bank, where I went to sketch, and, with entreaties for pardon, you told me that you had deceived me."

"You told me that your deep love for me had caused you to do wrong."

"Then I learned that your friend was a justice of the peace in a neighboring town, and had the right to marry us, as you had recently gotten a license."

"Oh, Oscar Leighton! my regard for you almost turned to intense hatred in that moment when you confessed you had deceived me."

"I might have loved you, had you not deceived me, and, when you seemed so contrite, and said that you loved me better than all the world, I forgave you your sin, for I can call it nothing else."

"But it was upon the condition, that you should not make our marriage known until I gave you permission."

"I told you that I would try and love you, would try to look to publicly becoming your wife some day."

"Now I have tried to keep my pledge, and yet, Oscar, I must frankly say that I have not increased in my love for you."

"I am bound to you, yes, and I will yet continue to try and love you; but, alas! it cannot be, I fear, for, bound to you as I am, I would like to have it so."

"I know that you are of a noble nature, that you love me, while half the girls are in love with you."

"You are brave, generous-hearted, have a wonderful talent, and can win hearts whenever you try, while you have seen much of the world."

"It was, perhaps, your betraying me into a secret marriage that prevented my loving you; but, candidly, Oscar, I do not, and I fear I never shall."

"Ah, Pearl, if you would only allow me to claim you openly as my wife, I would win your love, I would do all in my power to make you happy," Oscar Leighton said, earnestly.

"Why will you not set me free, Oscar?"

"Set you free?"

"Yes; we can secretly be divorced."

"Would you love me then?"

"I could not promise that."

"It could not be done without publicity, so let the compact remain as it is, for I will keep aloof from you, write to you only now and then, and give you six months from to-day to try and love me."

"And then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will you release me?"

"If you do not love me, I certainly will not wish to have you bound to me for life."

"But, Pearl, try hard to love me, will you not?"

She made no reply, but held forth her hand and taking it he bent over and kissed it.

For some reason she shuddered, and he saw it. But he made no comment upon the strange act on her part and said:

"Come, this is a gloomy place at best, and the shadows of night are making it more so."

"Let us return to the house."

She made no reply, but stooping down placed some flowers that she took from her breast upon the grave of Rodney St. Orme.

Then she turned away and the two walked slowly back to the mansion.

The next day Pearl, under the care of Lawyer Lennox, returned to her school, while Oscar Leighton went back to his roving life as an artist, and Madam Vavasour was left alone in the grand old home that was now the property of her beautiful daughter.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KIDNAPPERS.

A YOUNG man in the garb of a huntsman was seated on a rocky point of land that jutted out into the Hudson River not very many miles above New York City.

His suit of corduroy fitted his splendid form to perfection, his top-boots were of the best material and a slouch hat half-shaded a stern, handsome face, which was bronzed by exposure to sun and winds.

His shot-gun lay across his knees, and a game-bag, well-filled, hung over his shoulder.

He had seated himself among the rocks, where he could command a fine view down the river.

He had been there but a short while when a small sloop came across the river on the starboard tack and dropped anchor a cable's length off shore.

Then, turning his face landward he beheld a feminine form strolling down to the river-bank.

"It is one of the fair scholars from the young ladies' school on the hill, and she is an artist I judge, as she carries a portfolio, easel and camp-stool," he mused aloud, and he observed the lady take a position not far from the river and begin work with the air of one who knew what she was about.

She had not seen him, though he was but two hundred feet away from her, and he was debating in his mind whether it was really fair to watch her while unseen himself, when he saw a man approach the shore and make a signal to some one on the sloop.

A boat at once put off from the little vessel, and in it were two men.

It came straight to the point where the man stood, and the two men got out and held a consultation for some minutes with the man on the shore.

Then the latter turned and walked back into the woods, though directing his steps in the direction of where the fair artist sat.

The two men returned to their boat and rowed slowly around the point of rocks, where they grasped an overhanging tree and remained stationary, thus holding their boat steady.

They had not seen the huntsman on the rocks, for they had not glanced in that direction, and yet they were now within a few feet of him.

The men were hard-faced fellows, and by no means had an honest look, and the young man on the rocks watched them with some interest, while he heard one say:

"If this goes our way, mate, as it is planned, we'll finger a cool thousand atween us."

"It's got to go our way, for Sandy, yonder, bain't goin' ter make no mistake, and he's got the thing down fine; but yonder he is pretty close to ther leddy, so we might as well jine him."

The speaker let go the limb of the tree as he

spoke, and the two resuming their oars they rowed on down the river, keeping close inshore.

A glance showed that the sloop had not lowered her sails, and that a man now stood forward near the anchor-rope, upon which his hand rested.

Then the young huntsman beheld the man who had been talking to those in the boat, walking directly toward the fair artist.

"This looks like mischief; but I may be wrong."

"Still I'll watch developments," said the hunter, and rising he made his way adown the rocks to the shore, and was soon in the woodland, unseen by the men in the boat, the one on the sloop or he who had now joined the maiden.

He saw him raise his hat politely and the lady rise and turn toward him.

They seemed to be conversing together for a moment, and then the boat touched the shore.

Just as it did so the huntsman saw the man talking to the maiden spring forward and seize her in his arms, while he placed his hand over her mouth to prevent a scream.

The place where she was seated was a little glen, cut off from the view of the school buildings back upon the hill, and no one could see the scene going on there, where a young girl was in the clutch of kidnappers, for such they were.

But help came from an unexpected source, for as the men in the boat had joined their comrade, and in an instant had enveloped her in two large blankets, a tall form suddenly confronted them, while there came the stern words:

"Hold!"

The men turned upon the speaker, and then saw at a glance that one man had dared face three.

Instantly one sprung toward him, while he drew a pistol and was raising it to a level when the shot-gun butt of the huntsman was driven into his face with a force that knocked him senseless.

At the same moment one of the other men released his hold upon the maiden and fired at the hunter, the bullet cutting through his arm.

But the fire of the kidnapper was returned with a shot from the hunter, and the man dropped in his tracks, while his comrade had let fall his captive and had darted rapidly out of the glen down the shore out of sight.

The hunter at once sprung to the aid of the maiden and released her from the encircling blankets.

She was half-smothered, and her face was flushed with indignation, while she gazed with amazement about her.

"Rather an unceremonious meeting, miss; but I was forced by the circumstances to force myself upon you," said the hunter with a smile while he raised his hat.

"Oh, sir! they are dead? You have killed them!" and her eyes fell upon the two prostrate men.

"That one is dead, but I was forced to kill him as he fired upon me."

"The other is merely stunned, and the third escaped."

"You are from the school on the hill, I believe?"

"Yes, I am a pupil there, and my name is Pearl Vavasour, and I owe you more than thanks for what you have done for me sir."

"I have heard my sister speak of you, Miss Vavasour."

"I am Glen Richmond, of Elmwood, the grounds of which adjoin your school, where my sister is a day-scholar."

"Indeed! I have heard of you, Captain Richmond also, but supposed that you were out West with your regiment."

"I returned home yesterday, Miss Vavasour, and as my father and sister Lena are in the city for a few days, took my gun for a hunt today as I felt lonesome."

"But my man is recovering I see."

"Well, sir, I have caught you in some ugly work!" and the young army officer turned to the man who had been stunned by his blow.

His face was bruised and bleeding, for the butt of the shot-gun had struck him fairly in the face; but he wore a frightened look that was almost ludicrous.

"I didn't do anything, and you'll pay for striking me as you did," the man said sullenly.

"You didn't do anything?"

"Why you attempted to kidnap this lady!"

"No, I started to run off with her when I saw those men coming, for they looked like bad fellows."

The officer laughed and said:

"Pardon me, Miss Vavasour, but this man is champion among liars."

"Why, I was seated on the rocky point

yonder, saw the sloop, which has just gone down the river, drop anchor, and this man go to the shore and signal it.

"Two men came off in a boat and met this fellow, who at once came here to join you, and they meant to kidnap you I am sure."

"Seeing their suspicious actions and overhearing what the men in the boat said, I ran here to aid you."

"Now, sir, what have you to say?"

"Ah, sir, I'll tell all if you'll let me go."

"Those men got me to come here and plan to kidnap Miss Pearl, telling me I should get big money, for a large ransom would be paid for her."

"You see, sir, I was footman at the lady's house, and they came there and got me to come here and help them."

"He was footman, sir, at Sleepy Hollow Manor, my home, and when he came he said that my mother had sent him with a letter which he had lost."

"You'll let me go, Miss Pearl, won't you?" begged the man.

"I leave you in the hands of this gentleman, Harvey," and turning to Captain Glen Richmond, Pearl continued:

"But let me send you help from the house, sir, and again permit me to thank you, and hope that we may meet again."

She held out her little hand as she spoke, and Glen Richmond grasped it warmly, while he mentally observed that he had never gazed upon a more exquisite face than that of Pearl Vavasour.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HEIR TO ELMWOOD.

THE romantic rescue of Pearl Vavasour from the kidnappers was the talk of the neighborhood, and many a lovely young pupil of the fashionable boarding-school envied her the situation she found herself in as a heroine.

Pearl was loved by all in the school, teachers as well as her fellows, and many felt for her in the sorrow which had come upon her through the death of one of her cousins at the hands of another, as all believed, and the suicide of the latter.

At the school as a day scholar, was Lena Richmond, a lovely young girl of sixteen, between whom and Pearl a warm friendship had existed for some time.

Lena lived at Elmwood Hall, a grand old house, the daughter of a retired army officer, and a man of considerable wealth.

Glen Richmond, the son, had followed in his father's footsteps and entered the army, and having distinguished himself on the border had become a captain in his twenty-fifth year.

He was ten years older than his lovely little sister, and loved her as much as she idolized her handsome soldier brother.

The young captain had unexpectedly gotten leave and had returned home to find his father and sister absent for a few days, so had taken his shot-gun and gone hunting, a sport he was devoted to, and it was fortunate for Pearl Vavasour that he had done so.

His killing one of her kidnappers and severely wounding another, while he received a wound in the arm himself, made a hero of him at once, and congratulations flowed in thick and fast upon him.

Harvey the footman was taken to the county jail, while the body of the other kidnapper was buried.

The footman made a clean breast of the whole affair, and told how the men on the sloop had heard that Miss Vavasour had come in possession of a vast fortune, and they meant to kidnap her and make her pay a large sum for her release.

He had been asked by the rascals to join them, and the large sum they offered caused him to be tempted, for he thought that he would get a good price, while the young lady would not be harmed.

So he had yielded, and he felt that he would deserve punishment for what he had done.

If he knew who the men were, Harvey would not tell, for he said he only knew them as Sound fishermen and could give no further information regarding them, and so could give no clew to the capture of the others.

When Lena returned home with her father that night, she was rejoiced to find her brother there and also to know that it was Pearl Vavasour that he had served so well.

"Why, brother, she is the loveliest girl in the school, and her character is as noble as her face is beautiful."

"But she has been very sad of late, though I

do not wonder at it," and Lena told of her friend's griefs.

"And she leaves school soon, Lena?" he asked.

"Yes, she graduates next month, and ah! she is such a wonderful scholar."

"Why she is at the head of her class, then she is a really fine artist, sings divinely and has just come in for two fortunes, as I told you."

"And who is to carry off this fair lady as a bride, for I suppose that she has numerous beaux?" asked Glen Richmond.

"It is said that she is engaged to an artist, a handsome fellow who has turned the heads of half our girls; but I do not know whether it is so or not."

Glen Richmond sighed unconsciously, for already he had begun to take a deep interest in the beautiful girl.

As it was near the close of the session several entertainments were given to the graduates, and yet, Pearl Vavasour being in deep mourning did not appear in the parlor.

Captain Richmond was there of course, and the lion of the day, and the artful little Lena managed to arrange it so that he met Pearl, as though by accident.

Pearl certainly thought it an accident, for she was fairly caught sitting upon a little piazza in one wing of the house, when Lena appeared with the captain and begged pardon in a demure way, saying that she wished her brother to get a view of the river by moonlight from that point.

Several engagements for dancing were broken that night by the gallant captain, who remained nearly an hour from the parlor, talking to Pearl, and he had to make his excuses as best he could when he returned.

Before his leave was over Captain Richmond had the satisfaction of seeing Harvey the treacherous footman of Sleepy Hollow Manor sent to prison for a term of years, and when he did depart to rejoin his regiment he was forced to confess to himself that he had fallen irreversibly in love with Pearl Vavasour.

"What if she is engaged, as Lena fears that she is?"

"It would be a bitter blow to me, for I am not one to love lightly and forget easily."

"I will leave it to that sweet little sister of mine, who is to visit her this summer, to get at the truth, and if she is heart whole, as I sincerely hope, I will get another leave of absence and come back to try and win her love."

"She is not indifferent to me, I think; but it may be only gratitude that causes her to be kind to me."

"I wish I could meet this artist, that I might see the kind of a man it is said she loves."

"Ah me! I have met my fate at last, and I wonder if it is to be a cruel fate."

Three weeks after Glen Richmond was again upon the border with his company of gallant troopers, while Pearl Vavasour, having graduated with the first honors of her class, was once more at home.

One day the captain was surprised to receive a package by express.

It was addressed in an exquisite feminine hand, and upon opening the box, a velvet case was revealed in which nestled a superb gold-mounted sword with a monogram in diamonds in the hilt.

Upon the scabbard was the following inscription:

"To
CAPTAIN GLEN RICHMOND,
As a Tribute,
From one whom he risked his life to save.
June 10th, 18—."

There was no note accompanying the beautiful and costly gift, but the engraving on the scabbard told from whom it came, and Glen Richmond said to himself in an earnest way:

"I am at least not forgotten."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE START.

WHEN Lone Star Luke went up into the town accompanied by Dick Darling, he walked along as though he knew just where he wished to go, and was well acquainted with the surroundings.

He made his way to the outskirts of the city, and stopped at a small cottage, which was surrounded by a large garden.

A light burned in the window, and a knock at the door caused it to be opened by a young man, who said, pleasantly:

"Welcome, Friend Lone Star, you and your friend."

They entered the little hallway and Dick Dar-

ling saw that all was neatness and comfort about the cottage, and the host was an honest-faced young man of twenty-five.

"This is my friend, Mr. Dick Darling, Pard Sanford, of whom I told you about two hours ago, and both of us hev got ter lay low or we'll git tuk up, as I also told yer."

"Ter-morrer you kin purchase a outfit in which we kin make our way towards San Antonio, fer my pard here hev concluded to go along with me in thet direction."

"And, Pard Dick," continued the scout, turning to his companion:

"This heur gent are squar' clean through, free, white, and twenty-one, and he and his leetle wife, who are pretty as a pictur' o' a angel, will see as we don't suffer."

Bob Sanford, as one was familiarly called, blushed like a school-girl under this praise, and extending his hand to Dick, said:

"Mr. Darling, the friend of Lone Star is my friend, for I will tell you that I owe much to him."

"I was one of an emigrant train some years ago which the Indians attacked, killing many, among them my parents, and carrying off others into captivity."

"Among the latter was the daughter of an Alabama farmer, who was seeking a home in Texas."

"Her father was slain, and Lone Star at once set off on the trail of the Indians and rescued from their camp the fair captive, the lady who is now my wife."

"That was two years ago, and giving up all idea of prairie life after our bitter experience we came here to live, and I am practicing medicine and doing well."

"Now, Mr. Darling, you may understand that Lone Star's wish in this house is law; but let me present my wife."

Just then a lovely young woman entered the room, and she, too, made Dick Darling feel perfectly at home, while that Lone Star had told his friends about him he knew from her words:

"No one will suspect your presence here, so that you can remain as long as you please and be perfectly safe from discovery."

After a short talk the scout and Darling were shown to their room, a pleasant one in a wing of the cottage, and they were glad enough to get the rest they needed.

They met the young doctor and his wife at breakfast in the morning, and the former told them that he had been down-town, but had learned nothing of the captain of the schooner and the detectives having made any report thus far.

"I will make it my business this morning to discover just what they are about, Lone Star, and report to you," added Doctor Sanford.

The old negro and his wife, who were the doctor's servants, had seen the scout at the cottage before, so thought nothing of his presence there with a friend, and it was not likely that they would learn of the escape of a Government prisoner from a vessel through the aid of Lone Star Luke, or at least would not hear of it during the day.

After his breakfast, "Doctor Bob," as Lone Star Duke called him, went down to the harbor to learn all that he could about the escape.

He discovered that the captain of the vessel had reported his arrival, and that he had been wrecked upon one of the Bahamas, been attacked by wreckers, seized their craft and then come into port.

He had also made known that he had had on board as passengers two United States marshals, with a prisoner who was being taken to Mexico, for crimes committed there, and a Texan, a scout, who was returning from visiting his family in the North.

During the night the prisoner had made his escape, and as the Texan had also disappeared, it was thought certain that he had aided the man in making his escape.

The two marshals had asked to be allowed to go on the track of the prisoner and scout, without the aid of the town officials, and had disappeared.

Then it was said that there was a wrecker, one who had served the skipper of the schooner well, and had come to Galveston with him, had also left the vessel under cover of the darkness, and it was thought that the scout might not have been the one after all to set the prisoner free, but the wrecker.

This idea gained ground from the fact that it was said that the prisoner had considerable money with him, and could have bribed the wrecker to help him.

"Not a word is told as to what you said, Lone

Star, of getting the captain, officers and crew drunk," said Doctor Sanford.

"Oh, no! they is all in the same boat together, you bet, and men so situated don't tell on themselves."

"They was wuss nor drunk, they was paralyzed, for I put ther powder yer giv' me, Doc, in ther licker, and you kin gamble on it they felt it, for not a one of 'em moved while we was a-leavin', and the'r heads are about ther size o' flour barrels jist now, yer may be sart'in,' and Lone Star laughed as though he enjoyed the remembrance of the drunken skipper and marshals.

"Well, Lone Star, I got three good horses for you this morning, one to serve as a pack-animal, and a complete outfit in the way of the finest saddles and bridles, a rifle and small weapons for Mr. Darling, and, in fact, a complete camp equipage, and all will be sent up to my house to-night.

"I told the men I bought them of that I had some friends who wished to go on a hunt, so you can start to-night if you wish, or remain as long as you wish.

"This is the balance of your money, Mr. Darling, and of Lone Star's, over what you both gave me."

"I thank you, Doctor Sanford, and your kindness to me causes me to wish to prove to you some day that I am not guilty of the crime which those two officers were carrying me to Mexico to hang for," said Dick Darling, earnestly.

"I do not believe that you are, sir; but were you so, as Lone Star's friend, I would serve you all in my power."

"Yes, Mr. Darling, we are anxious to show our appreciation of dear old Lone Star as much as we can; but for yourself I will say, with my husband, that we believe you are the victim of circumstances that have placed you in a false position," Cora Sanford said.

"You are most kind," was the low response of the escaped prisoner, and Lone Star Luke rejoined:

"Waal, we hed better light out ter-night, fer them two onnery cusses of marshals is sart'in ter be on ther lookout fer us; but it's catchin' afores hangin', I has heerd, and I guesses we kin sarcumvent 'em somehow."

"Leastwise we kin try, Pard Dick."

Several hours after dark on the night following, two horsemen rode away from the pretty cottage of Doctor Bob Sanford and struck off into the country.

They were Lone Star Luke and his fugitive friend, bound for the wilds of Texas, where the daring scout was at home far more than in the confines of civilization.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN BUCKSKIN.

THERE was something about Dick Darling which Lone Star Luke did not quite understand.

He was a splendid-looking fellow to begin with, and certainly possessed a superior education, while his manners were refined and elegant.

He rode with a skill that a cowboy could not surpass, and showed a familiarity with the care of his horse and camp life which proved that he had had some experience with an out-of-door existence prior to his striking out on the trail with the scout.

Then, too, he was a dead shot with both rifle and revolver, could throw a lariat, and when he had spied a pair of foils in the house of Doctor Sanford, and the latter had asked if he fenced, he had proven himself the superior of the young physician with an ease that surprised him, as well as it did his wife and the scout, both of whom knew Doctor Bob was an expert with the swords.

Then the scout marveled at the great physical strength of his companion.

He would sing a sad song in a manner that would bring tears to the eyes, and yet could tell a funny story that would convulse the scout with laughter, while his own face never lost its look of sadness.

Why had such a man been accused of a murder in Mexico so foul that the Government had sent him back there under guard of two officers?

This the scout asked himself more than a hundred times.

Then, too, he had seen that the young prisoner was a sailor, and a good one, while he had proven himself a man possessed of great courage and a coolness under the greatest dangers that was remarkable.

"I only wish to find some spot far from civilization, where I can rest in peace for a while," he had said to Lone Star, the day after the two had left Galveston.

"I can find you the place, Pard Dick, and no one will ever find you thar."

"That is just what I desire, above all things," was the earnest response.

This locked a little to the scout as though the young man was guilty, and wished to hide from the law.

But Lone Star knew that many a desperate man had sought a haven in Texas, and he knew just such.

Why should he then shrink from Dick Darling as a companion?

He would not do so, but, on the contrary, make him his boon pard.

He owed his life to the young man, he knew, for the fate of all on the schooner would have been quickly settled but for the able manner in which Dick Darling had planned the way to settle the wreckers.

"Pard Dick," said the scout, as the two were sitting by the camp-fire, their second night out from Galveston.

"Well, Lone Star?"

"Does yer really want ter hang out in Texas?"

"For awhile, yes."

"You is a dead shot?"

"Yes."

"Kin outride a Comanche?"

"Yes, I have had much experience in riding."

"You takes ter camp life like a Injun."

"I like it."

"You has a eye for locality and ther lay o' ther land, as I has seen ter-day."

"Well?"

"Why don't yer become a scout, and be my side partner?"

"I am willing."

"I has a leetle ranch over near ther Rio Grande, and I has ther a nigger boy as I tuk from ther Injuns who were a goin' ter burn him as they was mad with him 'cause they couldn't scalp his woolly head."

"I jist tuk him fer my own property, and he hev stuck like a plaster ever since, and more, he are no slouch as a guide, scout and Injun-killer."

"I has a leetle ranch, as I said, and he stays ther and looks arter it while I are on Government biz among ther forts."

"I has a few head o' cattle, some ponies, chickens, pigs, sheep and a comfortable den, that is, I hed when I left, and I hopes I has yet; but ther Comanches is mighty hateful cusses, and they mou't be kilt Wool and run off with my crittur outfit, arter settin' ther shebang afire."

"Now yer kin jist chip in with me and dwell ther."

"Wool, ther nigger pard o' mine, are a good cook, and I tells yer ther yer won't be unhappy thar, and kin study up ther kentry so as ter git ter be guide and scout yerself, and it are good pay when yer takes a train across the pararer, or goes on a scout for ther Government."

"Now, what does yer say?"

"I am with you heart and hand, Lone Star Luke."

"Done! it's fixed, then, and we is ter be Pararer Pards?"

"Yes."

"Give me a sample o' yer grip."

The young fugitive held forth his hand and Dick Darling warmly grasped it.

"You has, accordin' ter my advice, rigged out in buckskin, Pard Dick, and yer looks prime in it, that's sart'in."

"Now let yer hair grow long, and yer'll be ther boss pararer in no time, and nobody kin tell yer from ther real article, for yer looks it even now, and no one would jump arter yer now, fer fear yer would show yer claws, and yer has got 'em, tooth and toenail, ef they rubs yer ag'in' ther fur."

"Waal, as we hain't in no dangerous community jist yet, we kin turn in and sleep comfortable, but when we gits a leetle further off toward ther settin' sun, one o' us has got ter keep awake o' nights, you bet, for thar is danger thar, and no mistake."

"Life is a constant danger, Pard Lone Star, be it in civilization or among the wilds of Texas," was the reply of Dick Darling, and his words seemed to carry him back to something in his past of an unpleasant nature, for, without another word he wrapped his blanket about him and lay down to sleep, as though counting forgetfulness in oblivion.

And thus it was that Dick Darling, the mysterious prisoner, and alleged murderer entered upon a new career, giving up the dress of civilization for the buckskin suit of the borderman.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LONE RANCH.

UPON the frontier of Texas, not very far from the Rio Grande, and not very many leagues from San Antonio, was the ranch of the Texan scout, Lone Star Luke.

A man of the prairie he had found him a house far from the habitation of other men.

He had certainly selected a beautiful part of the country, for he had located in a bit of hill land through which wound a crystal stream.

Then there was timber in plenty for firewood, and a valley in which large herds of cattle could feed, with boundless prairies not far away.

The scout had built a comfortable cabin of three rooms, all in a row, and the center was larger by far than the other two.

The cabin was stout enough to be a fort, and it was built under the shelter of a cliff, the summit of which could only be reached by a crevice near the building, for it was a spur of a hill that stood above, rising like a huge castle above the ridge about it.

From the sides of this cliff the scout had built a stockade wall some ten feet in height, and along the inner side ran a shelf along which a man could walk and command a view outside.

The stockade inclosure was V-shaped, ending at the point in a gate, and in the several acres of space within was room enough for a large number of cattle.

There grew about in the inclosure, also, plenty of grass, and a bend of the stream ran under the stockade wall which thus gave plenty of water, should the place have to stand a siege.

The cabin commanded the entire inclosure, so that a party retreating therein could keep at bay a considerable force.

Lone Star Luke had evidently prepared for war in time of peace when he settled there, and his wisdom in doing so had several times proved correct, when a band of raiding red-skins, or robbers from across the Rio Grande, had attempted to drive off his cattle or destroy his little home.

The herd of cattle and ponies had been trained to come at the call of a horn, or be driven by several dogs, and they would come on a run and be safely housed within the inclosure in a very short while, after hearing the note of danger.

Some hundred head of cattle, two-score ponies, a flock of as many sheep, with some hogs and chickens, and half a dozen fine dogs, comprised the live stock of the scout's wealth.

Within his cabin there was an air of comfort and neatness, a home-like look that was very inviting.

One wing was his own room, and here he had a bunk, a book-shelf, table and couple of easy-chairs, while a lamp swung over the table.

The center room was the kitchen, eating-room, and place where the scout loved to sit on cool evenings before the huge fireplace.

The third room was where Wool, the negro factotum of the scout, slept; and here also was stored the provisions and traps of the place.

A shed ran along the front of the cabin, and made a pleasant place to sit and view the scenery spread out before the little home.

Here the dogs were wont to assemble, and in a large tree to one side the chickens would roost at night, presenting altogether a very home-like picture for a lone prairie home, far from other habitations of men.

At night the herds of cattle and ponies would feed about in the glen near the stockade, and the well-trained dogs would stand guard around them like a line of sentinels.

In the daytime two herds could feed on the prairies, and Wool or the scout would be on guard from the top of the cliff, from which an enemy could be sighted for miles away.

Such was the home of Lone Star Luke, and toward it one pleasant afternoon were riding two horsemen, while a pack-animal was led behind.

As they appeared over a rise in the prairie, far off on the horizon, a dog that was lying upon the cliff sprung down the steep pathway to the cabin, and barked as he ran.

"Hello, Watch, what you see, honey?" said a negro, who was eating dinner, which he had just cooked for himself and half a dozen dogs that were waiting their turn to be fed.

The dog that had been on watch upon the cliff gave another sharp bark and ran back up the pathway.

The negro at once grasped a field glass and a large horn from a shelf and followed him.

As he reached the cliff he saw the two horsemen far away, and turned his glass upon them.

"You got good eyes, Watch, for dere is somebody comin', sure."

"But I don't hab to blow my horn and start de other dogs out ter run in de stock, fer ef I hain't mistook dat am Massa Lone Star comin'.

"Waal, it are time he were here, as he say he would be gone 'bout t'ree months, and dey was gone by last week."

"Yes, it are Massa Lone Star, and he hab a pard with him, so I gits a good dinner for 'em, soon as I see 'em a little closer."

After a while the negro seemed convinced that there was no doubt as to one of the horsemen being his master, so he waved his sombrero around his head three times, gave a yell that rung out far across the prairies, and went down to the cabin to prepare dinner.

He was a tall, wiry-formed fellow, straight as an arrow, and with a bold, intelligent face.

He was dressed in buckskin, even to moccasins, and wore a pair of revolvers and a bowie knife in his belt, for even with such good guardians as were the dogs he was not to be caught unarmed.

A large-brimmed sombrero covered his head, and upon it, in no unskillful manner was painted a skull and cross-bones in white, a red hand, and devices of various kinds.

It seemed as though Wool wished to be considered by the few who knew him as a Hoodoo man.

By the time that he had cooked a good dinner, and one most tempting to hungry men, the horsemen were visible coming up the valley.

There were venison steaks, potatoes and onions, for Wool kept a vegetable garden going, and other things to tempt the palate.

He ran down to the stockade gate, accompanied by all of the dogs except Watch, who had returned to his lookout on the cliff, and greeted Lone Star and his companion as they rode into the inclosure.

"Now, Pard Dick, this heur nigger are Wool, and he are a man clean through, would fight a buzz saw, and risk his life ter save a human in distress.

"Shake his hand fer it are honest to ther bone."

"Wool, this are my pard Dick Darling, and I owe much to him in the way o' gratitude and we is ter live together here, so jist do yer best ter please him, for yer'll take to him kindly yer kin bet."

"Now give us some grub and then tell me how things has got along since I went travelin'?" and the scout dismounted at the cabin door, while Dick Darling following his example, evidently much surprised at the very comfortable home of the scout and his black pard Wool.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRACKERS.

To describe the scene on board of the little schooner, when the captain, and two officers and the crew awoke from their drugged sleep, after the orgie with the scout would be utterly impossible.

One of the officers, whose name was Barkis, was the first to arouse himself from his stupor.

He felt cramped, his head was aching fearfully, his lips were parched and he was a very wretched man.

He got up, looked about him and saw that the cabin lamp still burned though it was broad daylight.

He went to his comrade's bunk to arouse him and found some trouble in doing so, and then awakened the skipper, who seemed dazed.

Going on deck he found the crew in a state of mind that was very miserable, and repentant after their night's debauch.

A call from Brewer, his comrade, took him in haste back to the cabin.

There he discovered that not only was the scout not in his bunk, but the prisoner was gone also.

The scout had a way of getting up early always, and he had said that he meant to leave at dawn, and would hail a shore-boat.

But the prisoner was gone though he had been chained in his bunk, and also handcuffed.

This looked suspicious, especially as the scout was known to be his friend.

Then it was found that one of the crew was missing.

It was Travis the wrecker, and the skipper laid the escape upon him rather than the scout.

The captain and the officers then went ashore, and while the former reported his arrival and the happenings of the voyage to the authorities, the latter set about trying to discover some trace of their fugitive prisoner.

The chief of police asked them a number of questions about their prisoner, to all of which he received rather unsatisfactory replies, and it seemed evident that the nature of the crime com-

mitted caused them a desire to keep it a secret for some reason best known to themselves.

The offer of the chief also to give them detectives to work up the case was refused, and they started forth to track the fugitive themselves.

They got their traps from on board the schooner, and having no further use for the captain bade him farewell, and looked up obscure quarters in which to stop for the time they were in Galveston.

They also had a notice put in the papers that they had gone on to Mexico to report the escape of their prisoner, and then cutting off their beards they disguised themselves in other ways as best they could and began the search.

They first went to every boatman to find out if one had been employed on the night of the prisoner's escape in carrying him to the shore from the schooner.

Their work proved useless, and so they had to try some other plan.

They found out that Lone Star Luke was pretty well known in Galveston, but had not been seen by any of his friends, or at any of his old haunts.

The scout's character was above reproach they found, so they were compelled to keep a civil tongue in speaking of him as one who could be bribed to help a murderer escape.

"We must not give it up, Brewer, for there is too much money at stake in it for us," said Barkis to his companion, as the two sat together in their room at the boarding-house where they had sought quarters.

"Yes, the man must be found, if we expect to get the reward," answered Brewer.

"I think we had better try a new plan."

"Well?"

"Find the wrecker."

"Travis?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think he was the one who aided the fellow to escape."

"I don't."

"You think it was the scout?"

"Yes."

"Well, my idea is that the wrecker just got the gig, which was astern, took the man ashore and brought the craft back with a shore-boat."

"And the scout?"

"Was doubtless drunk and asleep as the rest of us was."

"Well, let us look for the wrecker."

"It will be best."

"He's evidently at some sailors' boarding-house, and maybe there we'll find the prisoner too."

"Then we'll begin the search to-night."

They divided their forces, each going a different way, and were to meet again at their rooms about midnight.

Barkis came in first and sat down to smoke his pipe and await the coming of his companion.

It was not very long before he heard him coming up-stairs, and then his ears told him that he was not alone.

There were two steps upon the stairs.

A moment after the door of the room opened and in stepped Brewer.

The man who accompanied him was Travis the wrecker.

"You've got him?" cried Barkis joyfully, springing to his feet.

"I has."

"You've done good work, mate."

"And intend to do better."

"How so?"

"Keep quiet and I'll tell you all."

"Where did you catch him?"

"I'll tell you that too; but now get out the bottle and something to eat, for Mr. Travis is to be our guest to-night, and we'll rig him up something to sleep on," and the wrecker was told to take a seat, which he did with the air of a man who was not pleased with the position he found himself in.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

"MATE, I'll tell you just how I found our friend here, and he was not long in coming to terms when he heard my argument," said Brewer.

"You see, I went into a sailors' boarding-house, and I saw playing cards at a table, with his back toward the door, this gentleman.

"He had a new suit of clothes on, but I recognized him, although he had shaved off his beard too."

"You see his face looked so white where the beard had been, that I knew it had been cut off recently and had not tanned up again."

"I sat down near him and watched the game,

and when I saw he was in good luck, did not disturb him; but when he began to lose, I just tapped him on the shoulder and called him away.

"He did not know me, but looked suspiciously at me, yet did as I told him.

"Then I told him who I was, and that I was on his track.

"I told him, just as we talked it over, that if he'd turn State's evidence as it were, and make a clean breast of it, we'd see that he got off free, and more, would promise him a snug sum out of the reward the Government of Mexico offered for the return of the prisoner.

"Then I told him if he refused to tell the truth, I'd take him to Cuba and give him up to the Spaniards as a wrecker of the Bahamas, and that meant the *garrote* for him.

"Under these circumstances he wisely said he would come here with me, and you see him before you."

"I do for a fact, Mate Brewer.

"But does he know anything?"

"I think he does.

"Now, Mate Travis, just help yourself from that bottle, and then tell us what you know."

The wrecker sullenly obeyed, as far as helping himself to the liquor was concerned, but then said:

"Do you want to know if I helped the prisoner to escape?"

"Yes."

"I did not."

"Who did?"

"The scout."

"How?"

"Well, he got you all drunk, and put some drug in the liquor to stupefy you."

"Aha!"

"Then he set the prisoner free, called to me to come along, and we left in a shore-boat which he had already waiting off on the water, and signaled to come alongside."

"And then?"

"We went ashore, and then he told me to go my way, and the prisoner walked off with him."

"They gave you no hint as to where they were going?"

"None."

"It is strange."

"Why, for I was not their friend!"

The scout told me he would set me free when we got to port and give me a little gold to start me in life, if I would pilot the craft out of the island reefs.

"I did so, and he kept his word."

"And that is all you know about them?"

"It is."

The two officers stepped apart for a few moments and conversed in whispers.

Then they came back to the table and said:

"Travis, do you wish to make some money?"

"That's what I do."

"Well, if you will serve us we will pay you well, so start out to morrow and see if you cannot find out from some of the scout's friends where he is most likely to be."

"If I do?"

"We'll pay you well, and if we find him I'll double your pay."

"I thought you wanted the prisoner?"

"We do; but where we find the scout we will be apt to find the prisoner."

"If you don't?"

"Then the scout shall be forced to tell where he is. Will you help us?"

"Yes, for good."

"You shall be well paid, as I said."

"And if you do not act square we'll see that you hang for a pirate," added Barkis.

"I'll do the fair thing by you, for the prisoner is nothing to me," was the reply of the wrecker, and then the three began to plot their manner of proceeding upon the morrow.

The next day they started forth upon their search for the friends of Lone Star Luke, and when they met at night Brewer had discovered that the scout had a ranch once on the Rio Grande and had doubtless gone there.

Then Brewer had discovered that the scout had a friend who was a young doctor, and that the latter had purchased three horses and a camp outfit on the day following the escape of the prisoner.

Brewer had gone out to the cottage home of the young physician, and seeing the old negro man working in the garden had called to him and asked him quite a number of questions.

The result of it, mates, was that I found out that his master had had two visitors of late, one of them a scout and the other a handsome young gentleman.

"Now they have gone away together, and left by night, and their destination was doubtless the ranch of Lone Star Luke.

"But will the prisoner go there with him?" asked Barkis.

"Why not?"

"He might go to some other place on the coast or in the interior, and from thence make his way North again."

"Perhaps; but that we can only find out by starting for the ranch of the scout."

"It's a long trip, and a dangerous one."

"Yes; but risk nothing, gain nothing."

"You are right, and what we gain is worth the risk; but we will have to get an outfit, guide, and be ready to protect ourselves."

"We can do that, for we'll take a coaster for Indianola, and from there go on horseback to San Antonio, for the ranch of the scout is between the latter place and the Rio Grande somewhere."

"Well, I'm ready, mate, whenever you say the word."

"We'll go by the first coaster and we'll get our guide and outfit in Indianola."

This course having been decided upon, the three men left Galveston the next day in a coaster, bound for Indianola.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HEIRESS AT HOME.

The fair heiress to the Dabney fortune had finished her school days and returned to her home.

Sleepy Hollow, the grand old estate of the Dabneys, was hers, through the death, by the hand of an assassin and by suicide, of Rodney St. Orme and Richard Dabney, and with it she had a large fortune to support it.

So matters stood when Pearl Vavasour returned to her home.

She had graduated at the head of her class, but entering into none of the festivities of the occasion, had accompanied her mother to Sleepy Hollow and settled down to a life of quiet.

There were haunting memories about the old home, and having loved her two cousins dearly, she could not but mourn their untimely taking off.

Her mother was cheerful, in fact seemed perfectly happy under the circumstances then existing; but the haunting phantoms of Rodney St. Orme and Richard Dabney would rise before Pearl in the dead hours of the night.

Some days after her return Lawyer Lennox came down on a business visit, and then Pearl found herself in full possession.

After his departure Madam Vavasour began to hint at a quiet tea, or dinner party; but Pearl had at once said that she would indulge in no gayety at Sleepy Hollow, that its doors should not be thrown open to guests, until a year had passed since the death of Richard Dabney.

There was another phantom that came before the young heiress, and that was her being bound to Oscar Leighton the artist.

The more she thought of this the more she fretted under the chains that bound her to him.

She was a wife in secret, and though she felt sure that her mother would be glad to have her marry Oscar Leighton she yet felt that she did not love him.

When she thought of the artist the remembrance of the soldier came before her.

She had not forgotten the man who had saved her from the kidnappers.

She had sent to him, to Glen Richmond, a sword as a fitting tribute for a soldier, and as a souvenir of her appreciation of his act.

His handsome face came before her, and then between the two arose like a phantom the form of Oscar Leighton.

"I certainly have my cross to carry, and a cruel one it is," murmured Pearl as she sat alone one afternoon.

Then it came to her to have Lena Richmond come to her on a visit, and she thought of writing her, when her mother joined her.

"Pearl, I have decided to have my portrait and yours painted, and also several views made of pretty bits of scenery about Sleepy Hollow.

"Yes, mother."

"And I know of no one who would do them better than Mr. Leighton."

"I suppose that he would, mother; but I dislike to have any business transactions with Mr. Leighton."

"I will attend to that part of it my child, and will at once write to him to come here and do the work."

"Mother, if he comes he is to paint your portrait, not mine, and what views you may wish; but he is to remain at the hotel in the village, not to be my guest."

The words were spoken firmly, and Madam Vavasour was surprised.

Becoming an heiress had certainly made her daughter firmer, and somewhat hard in expressing her opinion in contradiction to her own.

Then Madam Vavasour said:

"You are foolish, Pearl, and I will not yield to your ideas regarding Leighton."

"I will write him and have him come here."

"Then, mother, I shall accept Lena Richmond's invitation to visit her and remain during Mr. Leighton's visit here."

"Why, Pearl, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, mother."

"Do you not like Mr. Leighton?"

"Oh, yes, very much; but I do not wish to entertain him here at Sleepy Hollow."

"You are foolish, child, and—"

"Mother, I will go to Elmwood, as I said."

"Well, I will write him to come and remain at the hotel."

"Do so, if you wish mother, and I will write to Lena to come and visit me, if she will be content with a house of mourning."

"Why do you wish her now?"

"Because I am lonely."

"Leighton is certainly delightful company."

"True, mother, but he is to paint your portrait and will be busy all the time, so I will have Lena come, and in a quiet way, we can enjoy ourselves."

Madam Vavasour was piqued.

She saw that Pearl would be firm and carry out her threat to go to Elmwood on visit.

By the terms of the will she was her own mistress at eighteen, and her birthday had just passed.

Madam Vavasour did not care to quarrel with her daughter, and so it was that she yielded.

She wrote to Oscar Leighton to come and do some work for her, and Pearl's letter went to Elmwood, asking Lena Richmond to visit her.

Upon the same day the two arrived, and, much to his chagrin, Oscar Leighton went to the hotel in the village a mile away, instead of becoming, as he had hoped to be the guest at Sleepy Hollow.

But he had an idea that Pearl had been the one who had wanted him to come to Sleepy Hollow, and his heart felt hopeful for the future.

"We will be glad to have you return home with us Sundays, Mr. Leighton, when we attend church, and take dinner with us," Pearl had said, and Madam Vavasour bit her lips, for she had intended to have the artist to dine and lunch every day.

"What a charming spot, Pearl, and the idea that you could think I would not be happy here with you," Lena Richmond had said, when she glanced about her from the broad piazza.

"I hope you will be, Lena, for we can drive, ride, walk, go boating, and enjoy ourselves indoors, also; but we will have to depend upon ourselves wholly, as we will have no beaux, for Mr. Leighton will be busy with his painting, you know."

And Oscar Leighton began to think, as he heard this, that after all Pearl had not been the one to send for him, under cover of her mother's wish to have him paint the portraits and landscapes.

CHAPTER XXII.

BLACK JACK.

The coaster, with the two Government officers and Travis, the wrecker, on board, reached Indianola in good time.

The skipper of the vessel had told the men where to go to find a guide, as they had said they wished to go into the interior toward San Antonio, and upon landing they sought an obscure tavern and looked about for their man.

They found him in the person of one who answered to the name of Black Jack.

He called himself scout, guide, hunter, Indian-fighter and borderman in general, but was known to be one of the worst desperadoes in the community.

As there was a scarcity just then of plainsmen in the town, the two officers were compelled to take the best that offered, and after consulting together about Black Jack, they decided that, after all, he would be just the man.

So he was told to visit them at their tavern.

He came promptly, and was sober.

He thought that he scented a good thing ahead, and so deprived himself of his usual allowance of rum for the occasion.

"I'm on hand, Stranger Pards, like a thumb," he said, with an attempt at wit, as he entered the room where Barkis and Brewer sat, for Travis was not admitted to the council.

"We are glad to see you," said Barkis, and he motioned to a chair and shoved a bottle and glass toward him.

"I don't drink much," said Black Jack, with a virtuous look, and then gave the lie to his words by pouring out a glass nearly full of liquor and dashing it off as though it had been water.

Black Jack was a dark-faced man, with long hair, and his look was that of a cut-throat.

He had a finger gone on his left hand, one ear gashed, and his face was badly scarred.

His form was muscular and his movements were quick and he had the appearance of being always watching for a foe.

"Your name is—"

"Black Jack."

"Well, sir, we want a guide out into Texas," continued Brewer.

"I are yer man."

"We wish to go out to the neighborhood of San Antonio, between there and the Rio Grande."

"All right, pard."

"You know the country?"

"I guess I does know it, for I has fit Injuns all ther way about thar."

"Do you know a man by the name of Lone Star Luke?"

The name seemed to act as a red flag upon a bull, for Black Jack sprang to his feet and roared:

"Does I know him?"

"I does, and

"Does yer see this slit in my ear?"
 "Yes."
 "Lone Star Luke slit that with his bowie."
 "Well, Black Jack, do you know where the ranch of Lone Star Luke is?"
 "I does."
 "Will you guide us there?"
 "I'll do it if you go strong enough."
 "How do you mean?"
 "Does yer go to tackle him?"
 "We go to arrest a man who is there."
 "I see."
 "And, besides yourself, there will be three of us?"
 "And there is three there."
 "Three?"
 "Sart'in."
 "Who are they?"
 "T'her scout, t'her man yer wants ter git, and t'her nigger."
 "A negro?"
 "Yer bet, and he are as dangerous as a wolf."
 "Well, you think we will need more?"
 "Waal, be sart'in ter go fixed."
 "How many men would you say?"
 "I has got two pards, Juniper Jim and Chaparral Charlie, as would just be t'her angels ter take along. fer, like I is, t'hem hain't friendly with Lone Star Luke, he hevin' mistook them fer cattle one day, and put his brand on 'em as he did on me."
 "They would make our party six in number."
 "Yas."
 "And about the price?"
 "Well, we'll be easy on yer, leastwise I will fer us all, as it ar' a trail o' revenge."
 "What do you call easy?"
 "How long wu' yer want us?"
 "To the end of the trail."
 "Call it a couple of weeks."
 "Well?"
 "I'll go for expenses and a couple o' hundred, and expenses and one hundred each for t'her boys."
 "It is a bargain."
 "Then that's t'her outfit."
 "Have you not your own?"
 "We has, you bet; but you hasn't."
 "We will need three horses and weapons."
 "Pards, you needs five horses, two extra critters for packs, and ter use of one goes under."
 "Then yer needs a rifle each, a pair o' revolvers, and a bowie apiece, plenty o' powder and lead, grub for the outfit, blankets and such."
 "I guess you are right."
 "I know I is, and I'll get the whole outfit for yer, fer seven hundred dollars."
 "It's a big sum."
 "Waal, it's a big undertakin', fer Lone Star Luke are at the other end o' this trail."
 "We'll pay the price; but you must engage to go on with us if our man is not there."
 "I'll go."
 "Then go and select the horses and outfit, and we will join you later and pay for them."
 Black Jack departed, and had he mused aloud as he left, we would have heard him say:
 "I'll make a couple o' hundred in gittin' t'her outfit, so it hain't no bad spec fer me, arter all, 'specialy as I gits a chance ter kill Lone Star, an' t'hat are wu' much whar it don't cost me nothin'."

CHAPTER XXIII.

CAUGHT.

DICK DARLING was delighted with his new home. The wild, free life of the prairie just suited him. He found the cabin most comfortable. Wool was a splendid cook, the larder of the scout was always well supplied, and with vegetables, game, chicken and eggs there was certainly abundance to eat. The scout, after a couple of weeks' rest decided to make the rounds of the forts to see if there were any orders for him from the commanders.

"I may be gone some time, Pard Dick, so just understand that this is your home same as mine."

"You and Wool is pards already, and I guess you've got an idee of prairie life so you will larn quick."

"When I return I'll come through San Antone and just pick up a lot of priovsions."

"If there's anything you want to know just ask Wool, for he knows it all."

So said Lone Star Luke, as he mounted his horse preparatory to d parting upon his trip.

Soon after Dick Darling was alone with Wool, and, determined to learn all he could of prairie and wooder fit he devoted his days to hunting, sometimes extending his rides for many miles from the ranch.

Six weeks had passed away and yet the scout had not returned, so that Dick Darling began to grow anxious.

He knew that Lone Star had expected to be gone over a month, but he felt a fear that all was not right with him.

"I guess he'll turn up, sah, but he hain't often stayed away so long," said Wool.

"I'll make a wide circuit of the country to-morrow, and see if I can meet him, for he should be returning about this time sur ly," Dick Darling replied.

The next morning he mounted his best horse and set off alone.

He wished to replenish the larder with game, and at the same time try and find his friend the scout.

He seemed content in this quiet life he led, and yet at times he was wont to say that there was work ahead of him that should be done.

It was afternoon, and he camped for his noonday meal.

His horse was staked out near him, and he was broiling a venison steak on the coals of a small camp fire, when suddenly into view rode a party of horsemen.

Dick Darling sprung for his rifle, and ran to the side of his horse, prepared to mount quickly.

They were all well mounted, six in number, and had two led pack-horses, while they were armed most thoroughly.

Dick Darling stood by the side of his horse, calmly awaiting their approach.

He noticed that they rode two by two and those in advance were dressed in buckskin, had long hair and wore the broadest of sombreros.

Halting not far off the party were conversing together for a moment and then one rode forward, holding up his hands as though his errand was peaceful.

As he drew near to Dick Darling he called out:

"We is friends, pard, and wants ter camp with yer."

"Who are you?"

"Texan Rangers o' Sam Hall's outfit."

Dick Darling had heard of Hall's Texas Rangers, and seeing six white men together had no reason to doubt their honesty, so he said:

"I'll be glad to welcome you and your friends, for I have pl-nty of game for all."

"Thankee, pard!" and turning in his saddle the stranger called out:

"Come, fellers!"

The others now rode forward, while the horseman dismounted and said, as he offered his hand to Dick Darling:

"I'm proud ter meet yer."

"Who might yer be?"

"My name is Dick Darling."

"Ah! and you is a darlin', an' no mistake."

"But here's my gang o' comrades," and turning to the others who now rode up, he continued:

"Pards, this gent are Mister Dick Darling, and you bet we is glad ter see him."

As he spoke the revolver of the man covered Dick Darling, who, to his horror now found six weapons leveled full at him.

To resist was certain death, and there was nothing to do but to submit.

"Who are you and what do you mean?" he said sternly, turning upon the crowd.

Then his eyes fell upon faces that he knew, and he was face to face with the two Government officers and Travis the wrecker.

"What does this mean?" he repeated, sternly.

"It means, mate, if you raise a finger, or wink an eye, you are a dead man."

"You dodged us pretty slick, but we took your trail, and here we are."

"You are a prisoner, Richard Darling."

Barkis was the speaker, and Dick Darling knew that resistance meant death.

He was caught, and there was then no mistake for him.

The men had dogged him to that faraway spot, and they were in deadly earnest.

"I submit, Barkis, because the odds are too many against me."

"If only you and your accursed comrade, with that treacherous pirate, formed the party, I would take my chances with you."

"Better be sensible and submit," Barkis replied.

"I do. So come, let us go to dinner, which your coming interrupted me in."

The coolness of the prisoner threw the men a little off their guard.

"Is you alone, pard?" asked Black Jack, a trifle uneasily.

"I am sorry to say that I am, for if my friends were with me you would see fun."

"Chaparral Charlie, you and Juniper Jim take a leetle round among t'her timber and see if they is any pards o' this gent's about."

"We'll hev yer dinner ready ag'in yer return," said Black Jack.

The two men, with desperado stamped upon every feature of their faces, obeyed the order by riding away, while Barkis dismounted and placed upon the wrists of the prisoner a pair of steel handcuffs.

Thus was Dick Darling once more a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TURN OF THE TIDE.

THE band under Black Jack were highly elated over their success in the capture of Dick Darling.

They had gone first to San Antonio, and had heard that Lone Star Luke and some friends had lately been there, but had gone to the upper forts.

Believing that the fugitive was with the scout, they started off on their trail; but after a couple of weeks following it, found the party, but to discover that Lone Star had left them some time before, and was alone.

Chagrined at their useless loss of time they had gone back to San Antonio, refit ed for the trail, and had then started for the ranch of the scout.

It was when within a couple of hours' ride of it that they discovered the fugitive, and the two officers at once recognized him in spite of his buckskin suit and sombrero.

They and the wrecker dropped back in the rear, while the three desperados, for such were Black Jack and his two comrades, rode in front, thus shielding them from observation for fear Dick Darling would recognize them.

Unsuspecting harm from Halls Rangers, as they professed to be, Dick Darling fell into a trap.

Having been taken he made no fuss about it, but submitted calmly and with seeming indifference to his lot.

He told the men to help themselves to his food and ate a steak with apparent relish.

So occupied were they with their dinner, that they did not see a party of horsemen appear over a hill behind them. Dick Darling did see them, but he made no sign of their coming.

A few moments after the horsemen dashed up to the camp.

The men sprung to their feet in alarm, and seized their weapons, but as quickly withdrew their hands, for they discovered that the new-comers were soldiers.

Also they were quick to observe that they were four to one against them.

They were a party of cavalry from a fort over toward the Rio Grande, and numbered an officer and twenty-five men.

The officer wore a captain's strap, was tall, handsome and had a face full of daring resolution.

He returned the salute of Black Jack and his companions, and then asked:

"Well, my men, where from and which way lies your trail?"

"We are rangers, Pard Cap'n, from down Indianola way, and has been on a hunt for a prisoner," Black Jack answered, and he added:

"Won't yer light, sir, an' take a bite with us, you and your men, while we also has a flask o' sperrits, ef yer'll try some."

"Thank you, but we camped for dinner a little way back, and I have a flask of brandy with me."

"It's good for snake-bites," said Chaparral Charlie with a grin.

The officer paid no attention at this effort at wit, but asked:

"Who is your prisoner?"

"I am, sir," and Dick Darling stepped before him, his hands in irons.

The cavalry officer gazed with considerable surprise at the face of the prisoner, and said, after a moment:

"Of what are you accused?"

"I'll tell you, sir," said Barkis stepped forward.

"Who are you, sir?"

"A Government detective, sir, as is also my comrade here."

"Well?"

"This man committed a murder in Mexico, robbed a wealthy ranchero, and fled to the States."

"Mexican Secret-Service men were put upon his trail, and they were unable to follow him in the United States so we was put under pay and started on the track o' this man."

"We ran him down in the North and got a permit to take him back to Mexico, where a big reward is offered for him, dead or alive."

"We started on a sailing schooner, were wrecked, and he escaped, so we employed these three men as trailers and tracked our fugitive here, capturing him not half an hour ago."

The story seemed to interest the officer, and he again turned his earnest gaze upon the prisoner.

"My man, you are in a bad way," he said.

"There are two sides to every story, sir, and I appeal to you to hear mine," said Dick Darling.

"Certainly, I will."

"He'll tell yu a pack of lies, captain," Barkis interposed, quickly.

"Silence, sir! Now, my man, what have you to say?"

"I would say, sir, that I was seized one night near my own home, in the North, and carried off by these two men, aided by others. They showed me no warrant for my arrest, but charged me with a murder committed in Mexico, I was taken on board a vessel bound to Galveston and Vera Cruz, and confined in the hold, heavily ironed. We were wrecked one night on the Bahamas, and I would have perished but for the fact that there was on board as a passenger a scout returning from visiting his people in the East. He released me, and finding that we were on a wreckers' island, and were to be robbed, if not murdered, I suggested a plan to defeat cursors."

"We did beat them off, captured their schooner and escaped in her, heading for Galveston—one of the wreckers, that man there, whose name is Travis, serving as our pilot and coming with us."

"In spite of the remonstrance of the scout, Lone Star Luke—"

"Lone Star Luke?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"He has gone on a round of the forts."

"I was just on my way to his ranch; but, go on, please."

"Well, sir, in spite of his remonstrance, they put me in irons again, but in the cabin, and upon our arrival at Galveston the captain and crew and these men drank deeply, and I escaped."

"This man came with me ashore, and there I left him, while I came ou here with the scout. That is the whole truth, sir."

"And you are not guilty of murder?"

"No more guilty than you, sir."

"When did you leave Mexico?"

"I was never in Mexico in my life, sir."

"Why did you not return home after your escape?"

"Well, I had good reasons for not doing so, or at least, not just yet."

"Have you the papers for this man's arrest?" and the officer turned to Barkis.

"No, sir."

"Where are they?"

"We lost them when we recked, sir."

"Yet I lost nothing, sir, that I had about me, and if you would search them, you will find that they have other papers that were not lost."

"My men, you have to show some authority for arresting this man and carrying him to Mexico, for well I know that he need expect no mercy there."

"Our word is our authority."

"It is not enough!" was the stern rejoinder.

"Yes, sir."

"Why are you here?"

"These men, in spite of my having saved them from the wreckers, told me they would hang me if I did not come with them to find the prisoner, so I did as they told me to do."

"Ah, but you confess yourself to having been a wrecker, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I was taken on a vessel, and to save my life joined them."

"Well, officers, you must show your authority to me."

"I told you we lost it."

"Then I shall set this man free."

"You won't dare to do so, sir, ag'in' orders o' your Government."

"Don't get ugly, for I am not one to brook insolence. Give me the key to his irons."

"I lost it, sir."

Quick as a flash the revolver of the young captain was leveled at the detective, and then came the words:

"Hand over that key or take the consequences!"

It was handed over sullenly.

"Now, sir, let me tell you that I am at Fort Vidente, and captain of I company, Fifth Cavalry, and my name is Glen Richmond."

"Put down what I tell you, for I make myself responsible for what I do, which is to release this man from your power."

"Will you let him go, sir?"

"Yes, but I will ask him to give me his *parole* to report to the fort within a certain time, when you can come there with your extradition papers and *proof* that this person is the guilty one you seek."

"We know it."

"Then you will be able to prove it, otherwise you will have to give up your man."

"Will you hold him a prisoner at the fort, sir, until we bring you the papers?"

"No, for I have no authority to do so, unless you can show me that you have such," was the cool reply.

CHAPTER XXV.

OFF ON THE TRAIL.

BLACK JACK was a man who knew when to keep silent. He was not foolish enough to put on bravado where he saw an officer who knew what to do, and meant to do it.

So Barkis was not helped out in his story.

Nor did Brewer "chip in" to help Barkis out. He saw that it was useless, and, as for Chaparral Charlie and Juniper Jim, they were completely cowed. They did not like soldiers, for their consciences were not at peace.

As for Travis, the wrecker, he knew that things would go hard with him, if he remained with the detectives, after what he had said, so he added:

"Can I go with you, Master Darling? for these men will make it warm for me."

"Yes, Travis, for I believe you acted under compulsion," and having his hands free of irons once more Dick Darling raised his sombrero and said:

"I have to thank you, sir, for saving my life, for well I know what my fate would have been, as I doubtless resemble some man they are in search of and would have been useful for them to get their reward in delivering me over to the Mexicans."

"I will gladly give you my parole to be at the fort one month from to-day, by which time they can procure their papers and I can get mine to prove who and what I am."

"I accept your parole, sir, and as you are going to the ranch of Lone Star Luke, you can accompany me."

"And this man, sir?"

"He also, if you wish it, for he seems to fear those with whom he has been."

"I do, sir," earnestly said the wrecker.

"Remember, I am at Fort Vidente, and you are to come there with your proofs of this man's guilt," and the officer rode away, accompanied by Dick Darling and the wrecker, while the sergeant and the men followed, leaving Black Jack and his party looking after them in moody silence.

"Waal, that are a slip, and no mistake," said Black Jack, as the soldiers disappeared from sight.

"Curses on that young officer for his doings!"

"But I'll not give up my man," said Barkis, hoarsely.

"What's to be done, pard?" asked Black Jack.

"You are a trailer?"

"I is."

"Well, did you not hear that officer say the prisoner could come to the fort in a month?"

"Yes."

"Then he's going to be in these parts, and the soldiers are not going to stay at Lone Star Kit's long."

"I kinder catch on."

"When the soldiers have gone, what's to hinder us from catching the prisoner?"

"You is right."

"We can camp in some handy biding-place, you take the trail of the soldiers, and find out where the prisoner leaves them."

"Then send back Chaparral Charlie to bring us after you, and we'll catch Dick Darling, and that wrecker pirate as well."

"Waal, I'll show yer a good campin'-place, and then me and Chaparral Charlie will take the trail o' them brass button gents, and see whar they parts comp'ny with the pris'ner and the pirts."

The disappointed, yet still hopeful band then mounted their horses and rode on to a camping-place, which was certainly a pleasant one.

Here Black Jack and Chaparral Charlie left the detectives under charge of Juniper Jim, while they went off on the trail of the soldiers.

The latter had gone on toward the ranch of Lone Star Luke, and as they rode along, and Captain Glen Richmond conversed with the prisoner, he felt more and more convinced that he was falsely accused by the detectives.

"I have just been ordered down into this country, having been stationed in the Northwest, and I was on my way to the ranch of the scout, Lone Star, to secure him as a guide for a few days on a little war-trail I am on," said Captain Richmond to Dick Darling, when the latter had told him that his home was with Lone Star Luke.

When they reached the ranch they were met by the scout himself, who had just returned, and his dark face grew stern when he heard how his friend had been arrested.

He had never met the young captain before, though the sergeant and the soldiers were known to him, and he said, earnestly:

"Cap'n, it's a pack o' lies them pilgrims tells ag'in' this young pard o' mine, and I thanks yer for sacrum'vin' 'em."

"I'll go with yer, sir, on the scout, and when I comes back I'll just put in a appearance myself with my pard here, and we'll see if we can't prove a *alibi* for him as to the murder in Mexico."

"But it's late, sir, so just camp with us ter-night, and we'll be off on the trail by daybreak."

This the captain decided to do, and the party had a pleasant evening of it one night in the cabin, and when the soldiers departed the next morning Dick Darling went along with them, determined to accompany them for a few miles on the trail, while Travis remained with Wool at the ranch.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO SKIRMISHES.

WHEN Dick Darling left the soldiers it was late in the afternoon.

He started on the back trail, and branched off it on purpose to test his powers of finding the ranch alone and at night.

It was nearing sunset, when suddenly, over a rise in the prairie darted a horse and rider.

The horse was urged to full speed, and the rider was a woman.

A second glance showed him that she was flying from some enemy, and at sight of him she uttered a cry of joy and turned her horse directly toward him.

As she came on he saw that she was young, beautiful and looked frightened.

She was dressed in a blue riding-habit, wore a sombrero encircled by a gold cord and rode superbly.

Her horse was a fine one but ran as though tired.

"Ah, sir! I am pursued!"

The words came appealingly from the lips of the fair girl, and Dick Darling said quickly:

"Do not come near me, for they may open fire."

"Ride on, and I will protect you."

He spurred forward as he spoke, while just as he did so a horseman dashed over the rise.

A second after another appeared.

"Black Jack and Chaparral Charlie, as I heard them called."

"Now for it, as the rest of the gang must be near."

He came to a halt as he spoke, threw his rifle to his shoulder and cried:

"Hold, or you run upon death!"

The two men came to a sudden halt.

But, as they did so their rifles were raised to their shoulders and their fingers touched the triggers.

There were three shots almost together.

Then one man fell from his horse, two sprung toward each other, revolvers rattled and another man went down, as also did a horse.

It lasted but an instant, this fight of one man against two, but victory was on the side of Dick Darling.

He had a wound in his shoulder, but Black Jack lay dead on the prairie, Chaparral Charlie was dying, and Dick Darling stood, revolver in hand by the side of his dead horse, while the lady was riding toward him.

The fugitive at once walked toward the wounded desperado, who murmured faintly:

"Don't shoot, pard; I'm done fer."

"It is not my nature to strike a man when he is down; but, are you badly wounded?"

"I'm done fer, as your aim is true. Yer giv'n it ter Jack in ther head, an' yer hit me here, and fired but two shots."

He spoke with difficulty, and placed his hand upon his heart.

"Where are your companions?"

"Way back in the timber near where we nabbed you yesterday. They is waitin' fer me and Jack ter come back and then take your trail."

"And this lady?"

"She's ther colonel's darter, and we thought as how, seein' her alone on ther pararer, we'd git a little gold as a ransom ef we tuk her."

Just then the lady approached and said:

"These two men, sir, were once cowboys on my father's ranch. They were discharged, and vowed revenge against me, for I had my father send them off. But, sir, you are wounded."

"It is but a flesh wound, miss, so I must look to this poor fell'w, who is, I fear, dying."

Dick Darling turned again to the desperado and said, quickly:

"He is dead!"

It was true, for the spirit of Chaparral Charlie had taken flight an instant before.

"I am sorry, sir, I brought this upon you; for you are wounded more seriously than you admit. Come with me to my father's ranch, for it is but three miles away."

Thus urged, Dick Darling caught the horse of Black Jack, and putting his own saddle and bridle upon him, lashed the two bodies upon the animal of Chaparral Charlie, and after aiding the lady to mount, rode off with her across the prairie.

"I do not remember to have seen you before, sir, so I will introduce myself as Mrs. Carr, a daughter of Colonel Eben Dudley, whose ranch is my home."

"And my name is Richard Darling. Mrs. Carr," returned Dick, gazing with admiration upon the beautiful young woman.

"I have heard that an ex-army officer dwelt on a ranch near here with his family; but I wonder at your remaining in so wild a country."

"Oh, I was born and reared on the border, except for awhile when I was at school in New Orleans."

"I like the wild life, and my father is growing old, so I do not care to leave him, while my husband seems glad to have me remain here."

"Doubtless; because he is at the fort near."

"My husband is not a soldier, sir, but an artist, and he is now away from home, and has been for a long time, engaged in some work North."

Dick Darling made no reply, and the lady continued:

"I have been married now for two years and have seen little of my husband, but I hear from him very often."

They now came in sight of the cabin, which was very commodious, situated on the banks of a small stream and surrounded by a stockade wall.

As they rode up to the cabin a gray-haired gentleman with a military air and frank face greeted them and Mrs. Carr presented Dick Darling and told her story.

"The devils! they met a just fate, and you have done noble service for the country."

"Here, Ben, take these bodies away and tell the boys to bury them," and the colonel called to a negro man who stood near.

"Now, Mr. Darling, let me look to that wound of yours, for I studied medicine and surgery in self defense while at the fort, and from love of it, though I have no diploma as an M. D."

"Come, this is your room, so make yourself comfortable while I get my instruments and some lint."

The wound was not a severe one, for the bullet had not gone deep and was soon extracted.

With it skillfully dressed and his arm in a sling, Dick Darling joined the colonel and his daughter at supper.

The cabin was certainly a most comfortable home. There was a large sitting-room, with a piano in it, a guitar, shelves of books and numerous paintings, the latter having rustic frames which the fair hands of Theo Carr had made to adorn the artistic work of her husband.

Over the fireplace was a portrait of a young man.

"Why, whose face is that?" asked Dick Darling.

"My husband's, sir; Leigh Carr, the artist," said the young wife, proudly.

"Leigh Carr! why he is the very image of a friend of mine."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; and strange, too, it is that my friend is an artist, while there is a similarity in the name, for his is Oscar Leighton."

"How strange."

"That rascal son-in-law of mine seems to find much to detain him in the North, Mr. Darling; but it would take only duty as a soldier to keep me away from so sweet a wife as my daughter is, if I do say it," said the colonel.

Dick Darling agreed with the fond father, and then looked at a photograph of Leigh Carr.

"He painted his own portrait from this photograph."

"Is it not perfect?"

"It is," said Dick Darling, and he gazed long and earnestly upon the photograph, as though the face fascinated him.

The next day, after the colonel had again dressed his wound, Dick Darling left for the scout's ranch, promising to again visit them.

Straight to the ranch he rode at a rapid pace, and was nearing it when he saw Lone Star Luke across the prairie.

He rode toward him, and the scout said:

"A courier from the fort, pard, headed us off, with orders not to go on the trail ther cap'n had started on, so I come back home."

Barkis was dead when they reached him, but Brewer was only wounded.

"Pard, yer has got ter climb," said the scout, coolly, as he looked at the wound, though he knew that it was not dangerous.

"Do you mean it?"

"If you has got any confessions ter make now's yer time," was the answer.

"I do not wish to die and not atone for what I have done, so I have a confession to make."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DETECTIVE'S CONFESSION.

"You are the one to whom I would confess, sir," said Brewer, turning to Dick Darling, while his face grew perfectly pallid, as he believed he had but a short while to live.

"Well, sir, what would you say?"

"Your name is not Dick Darling?"

"Indeed!" said the young man, with surprise.

"At least it is not all of it, but may be your first and middle names, for years I knew you as Richard D. Dabney."

"You knew me?"

"Yes, at least I tracked you under that name."

"You tracked me?"

"Yes, for I was put upon your track by a man I did not know, but 'ho had gold to give for the work he wanted done."

"You amaze me."

"And me, too," put in Lone Star Luke.

"I don't know the man who bought my services, si; for he always disguised himself when he came to see me."

"You see I owned a little craft in Boston waters, and I wasn't leading the best of lives, so when I was offered a job that would pay well, I accepted."

"And the work you had to do?"

"Was to dog your steps and kidnap you. We were to take you to Mexico and there deliver you to a man whose address we had, and when he gave us a paper saying that he had put you to death, we were to return and get our pay from our employer."

"We caught you one night near your house, sir, on the beach, and while you were stunned, as you know, took you on board our craft."

"It was a long time before we could catch a vessel for Vera Cruz, so we did a little extra work in the mean time under orders from the same boss."

"That was to go up the Hudson and kidnap a young lady from school."

"We bought a footman at her house and worked through him, so we had all fixed, but that very officer we saw yesterday, Captain Glen Richmond, was home on leave, and he saw our game, killed one of my men, and bagged the footman, while I got away."

"Now, sir, you know our game, and my heart is free of its load for I would not die with my crime unconfessed."

"Don't yer fret about yer dyin', pard, for I just skeer yer, as yer hain't hurted too much, fer ther bullet glanced on yer side."

"But yer'll be a boss witness ag'in' ther gent as yer works fer, and I guesse Pard Dick here kin afford ter give yer freedom ef yer serves him faithful now."

"I certainly will do so, for your words have let me into a dark and damning mystery against me, and you may aid me in solving it, in tracing it to the bitter end," and the young cadet, the supposed suicide as the reader now knows him to be, spoke with a voice that quivered with intense emotion.

"And I'm only too glad to serve you, sir," cried the pretended detective, and elated by the thought that he was not dying he sprung to his feet.

"Pard Dick, you go on with yer man to ther ranch, and Wool will go too and fetch back some tools ter put these dead men under ground while I stays here ter keep off ther wolves," said Lone Star Luke, and mounting, accompanied by Wool and Brewer, the young cadet started upon his return to the ranch.

Wool went back immediately, with a spade and a shovel, while Dick Darling made the wounded man as comfortable as possible.

"Have you any writing that this employer of yours sent you?" asked Dick, after sitting in silent meditation for some time.

"I have, sir, for he wrote out his full instructions," and the man drew some papers, a good deal worn but perfectly legible, from his pocket.

Then the cadet took from his pocket a photograph.

It was the one which Theo Carr had shown him, and which he had asked permission to show a friend, promising to return it.

Upon the back was written a few lines, and there was a signature.

Upon the writing the cadet gazed for a long while, and then said:

"Can I keep this paper?"

"Certainly, sir."

Soon after Wool returned and said that the scout had gone to head off Captain Richmond and ask him to return by the ranch.

This Lone Star managed to do, and the next afternoon they rode up together, as the captain had sent his command on to the fort without him, the sergeant carrying a note of explanation to the colonel.

"I wished to see you, Captain Richmond, to have you hear the story of this man, and my own, as you are interested, I find, in what he has to say, and I have much to thank you for, as the rescuer of one who is as dear to me as were she my own sister."

"You will also discover, sir, that I am not the murderer I was accused of being."

"I have promised that this man shall not get into trouble from his confession, and he is to help me

solve the mystery, to discover for me a secret that has been haunting me for a long time; but permit me to tell you that my name is Richard Darling Dabney, and that Miss Pearl Vavasour is my cousin and adopted sister, while I was a cadet at the Military Academy, and only left it because my comrades outlawed me, as you shall hear."

"I have heard of you, Cadet Dabney, and I now feel that you have been the victim of a plot," said the astonished officer.

Then, with increased amazement he heard the story of the pretended detective, and said when he had listened to what the outlawed cadet had to tell: "Dabney, I will go North with you, for I had already asked for a leave of absence and expect it has arrived by this time."

One week after, as the wounded man was able to travel Dick Dabney started with him for the fort, Lone Star Luke acting as guide.

There Captain Richmond joined them, and they went on to the nearest town and from thence by rail northward, the scout returning to his ranch, where Dick promised to visit him at no very distant day.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MASKED MURDERER.

OSCAR LEIGHTON had just finished the portrait of Madam Vavasour and the three ladies and the artist were looking at it as they were seated in the library one morning, when the mail arrived.

"Oh, mother!" suddenly cried Pearl, as she grasped a letter in her hand.

"Why, Pearl, what ails you?"

"Here is a letter in Dick's handwriting, so he cannot be dead," she said with quivering voice.

All were startled, and with trembling hand Pearl opened the letter.

It was dated at New Orleans and was as follows:

"Don't start, dear cousin, when you see my writing, though it tells you I am not dead, as I have been supposed to be."

"Knowing that I had become heir to a large fortune, I was seized by some sailors and carried off on a vessel bound to Mexico, there to be held for ransom, I suppose."

"But our vessel was wrecked upon the Bahamas and I escaped, so am on my way home."

"More I cannot write, other than to say that I have met, as a traveling companion, Captain Glen Richmond, who tells me that he was so fortunate as to save you from kidnappers, and that his sister is now visiting you."

"He will come to Sleepy Hollow with me, so expect us soon after the arrival of this letter."

"By the way, the captain says the sword you sent him is fit for a general-in-chief to wear."

"He is a splendid fellow, and—"

But here Pearl stopped reading, for she cared not to let the others know what the continuation of the sentence was as it read:

"If you don't fall in love with him you'll surprise me."

That Madam Vavasour was disappointed was certain, for the return of Dick Darling took Sleepy Hollow and his share of the fortune from Pearl, and the mother was avaricious.

But Pearl both laughed and cried with joy, while pretty Lena Richmond was in an ecstasy of delight.

As for the artist he congratulated Pearl upon the return of her cousin, and said jokingly:

"In spite of your fortune, Miss Pearl, I love you still."

Pearl frowned and bit her lip, and then set to work to prepare for the coming of her cousin and his guest.

The next week they arrived, and as the carriage drove up Madam Vavasour, Oscar Leighton and the young ladies were there to receive them.

It was just after nightfall and they were led into the library, where Captain Richmond was presented to Madam Vavasour and Oscar Leighton, while Dick was introduced to Lena.

"Mr. Leighton," said Dick after they had all conversed for some time:

"While in Texas I met some friends of yours, in fact your wife!"

"My wife, sir?" almost hissed the artist, while he became deadly pale, and a cry broke from the lips of Pearl which no one understood.

"Yes, and I was so fortunate as save her life, and being slightly wounded went to her father's ranch."

"There I saw your portrait, painted by yourself, and—"

"You are mistaken in the person, Mr. Dabney, for I have no wife."

"Not under the name you bear here, sir, for her name is Mrs. Leigh Carr, two syllables of your name, Oscar Leighton reversed, do you see."

"Do you intend to accuse me, sir, of—"

"Hold, Oscar Leighton, you shall hear what I have to say."

"I have here your photograph, taken in Newport, and the name on the photographer's books is Oscar Leighton."

"On the back of this photograph is the name of Leigh Carr, and you see it says:

"To my darling wife, Theo."

"And more, it is your writing, for here is some of your written instructions to your hirelings to kidnap me and carry me to Mexico to one who would kill me."

"Hold! You shall hear me, for there are men fully armed at the doors and windows of the room, and the man Brewer whom you paid to kidnap me, with others, and then to kidnap Miss Vavasour, that you might pretend to rescue her. I have here with me."

"Come in, Brewer,"

The man entered at the command.

"Brewer, tell the story you know of this man." In obedience the man did so, telling all to the horrified listeners.

"Nor is this all, Oscar Leighton, for Captain Richmond and myself have been a week doing detective work on your track."

"We went to your rooms in the city, and found there a gorgeous Mexican suit, just such an one as I wore at the masquerade ball given here the night that poor Rodney St. Orme was killed."

"To save me, for she saw the shot fired, and believed that I was his murderer, as you had, pretending to be me, made a threat to kill Rodney, my noble cousin, Pearl, swore that I was on the water with her."

"Do you understand, Oscar Leighton, she swore falsely, and I, believing I knew not what, acquiesced in Pearl's story; but I was believed to be guilty by all, was outlawed by my friends and thought to have killed my cousin because he was my successful rival for Miss Vavasour's hand, and also that, by his death, I might add to my fortune."

"It is strange, Oscar Leighton, how mysteriously all this secret has come out, but the murderer has become known, and I accuse you because I have full proof of your guilt."

"For your poor wife I feel the deepest sorrow, and I shall write to a friend of mine in Texas, a scout, asking him to go over to her home and place all the facts before her father, that he may break it to her as gently as possible."

"Now, Oscar Leighton, you are a prisoner. Officers, do your duty."

"One minute," and Pearl arose.

"I have a word to say, and it will still further blacken the character of that man. You all know of my meeting with him; but you do not know that he inveigled me into a mock marriage with him, and which now I find out, thank Heaven, was an illegal one," and Pearl went on to tell how she had been deceived by the fascinating scamp.

"Now, officers, you can do your duty," she added.

Two men entered the room and placed irons upon the hands of the unresisting man, who seemed utterly crushed by the blow, and was led out of the room in silence.

Then a pall seemed to have been lifted from the hearts of all; but the next morning Dick Dabney received the following dispatch from one of the officers who had the prisoner in charge:

"On the steamer last night the prisoner broke from us and sprung into the sea and was drowned, for he was ironed both hands and feet."

"It is better so perhaps, for his poor wife's sake," said Dick, and he read the dispatch aloud.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONCLUSION.

WITH the stain erased from his name, the mystery of the Masked Murderer solved. Dick Dabney seemed like another man, and Sleepy Hollow awoke to happiness, the only gloom upon it being the sad end of poor Rodney St. Orme.

True to his word, Dick wrote to Lone Star Luke a full statement of the case of Oscar Leighton, and the bearer was Brewer, who had asked to return to Texas and see if the scout would not let him become a cowboy on his ranch.

The scout gladly gave him the place, and then the two rode over to the Dudley Ranch to make known to the colonel what a wicked son-in-law he had had.

The colonel heard the story through with deep emotion, for he had been the one to make the match between the artist and his daughter, and he broke the news to Theo with great gentleness.

To his amazement and delight she said:

"Father, he fascinated me at first, but I never loved him."

"Thank God, I never loved him, and that now I am free from one so vile as he proved himself to be!"

And Theo had the scout and Brewer tell her all they knew, listening with a calmness that amazed them, while it also delighted them that the beautiful little woman did not break her heart for the unworthy man she had married.

A year passed away, and there were two weddings at Sleepy Hollow Manor, for there were united in the bonds of matrimony Miss Pearl Vavasour to Captain Glen Richmond, and ex-Cadet Richard Dabney to Miss Lena Richmond, and Colonel Richmond gave the brides away.

It may have been that this put the idea into the old colonel's head to also get married, for before he returned to Elmwood he asked Madam Vavasour to become his wife, and she accepted most promptly, and when the two bridal couples returned from their tour to Texas it was to attend another wedding at Sleepy Hollow.

During their visit to Texas the two gentlemen had given their wives a taste of camp life, for Lone Star Luke and Wool had met them at Indianola with an outfit and conducted them to Mystery Ranch, as the scout had named his home.

After a visit there of a few days, they all went over to Dudley Ranch to attend the wedding of the lovely widow Theo to an army officer from the fort, whom Captain Richmond, upon his return, had introduced to her.

Thus, having torn the mask off of the mysterious murderer of Rodney St. Orme, and proven the innocence of the Outcast Cadet. I "ring down the curtain" upon the characters of my romance, which, kind reader, is not as much a tale of fiction as you may believe.

THE END.

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